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SHAKUNTALA

LATE POET LAUREATE
LAKSHMI PRASAD DEVKOTA

Publisher
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Nepal.

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SHAKUNTALA (*An epic*)– *by Poet Laureate Lakshmi Prasad Devkota*

Preface

Shakuntala, an epic originally composed in English by the late poet laureate Lakshmi Prasad Devkota, is now published for the first time with the international readers in mind. Let us say that an attempt has been made in this epic to attire a sample of Eastern literature in a Western suit and the Nepal Cultural Association has given it the form of a book. In this regard, it can also be said that Devkota's personality itself is a product of Eastern culture and Western education.

Eastern philosophy is based on the principles of valour, succour, and sacrifice. Its hallmark is an enjoyment of life that is accompanied by a spirit of sacrifice and total detachment. In *Shakuntala*, Rishi Vishwamitra, exemplifies this capacity for enjoyment which is accompanied by the spirit of sacrifice. The result is the birth of a beautiful girl, Shakuntala due to whose cohabitation with King Dushyanta Bharat is born. We are told later on that Bharat himself enhanced the glory of Bharatvarsha, the Asian sub-continent. Implicating the whole history of civilization, the narration of the epic begins in the wilds and expands to the settlements. In a way Shakuntala becomes a link between a valourous eremite and a penchant for pleasures. It is as if Shakuntala's life itself were a co-ordination of heaven and earth.

Spiritualism is self-knowledge. It discovers the primal mystery of creation and makes us believers in the Almighty. For this reason all systems are based on philosophy as we well know. Philosophy makes man conscientious; it also establishes the fact that good systems anywhere in the world are maintained by conduct guided by sound discernment. While materialism pushes man toward greed, concupiscence, deceit, and strife, spiritualism teaches man to render the world fertile with life through an awareness of the values of succour and self-sacrifice.

Such an implication can be found in *Shakuntala*: falsity cannot last, truth will not tremble. This message dawns on the reader from this harmonious, charming, and interesting narration of the epic.

Finally, a word about the publication of this book. We cannot forget the readiness of late Pushkar Nath Upreti and the diligence of Shailendra Nath Rimal, the Treasurer of the Nepal Cultural Association, which made this publication possible. Rimal, by discussing this work with various men of letters, has contributed significantly to its publication. This work has also been well-evaluated by Madan Mani Acharya Dixit. We must not forget Mr. Lyndon Clough of the British council who took the pains to polish the English language of this epic. Dilli Raj Upreti has helped us in many different ways. The Nepal Cultural Association thanks all who have helped bring out this epic. We express our special thanks to Padma Prasad Devkota, the poet's son, who granted us the permission to publish this book.

We are grateful to the present President of this Association, Narsingh Bahadur Shrestha, without whose financial assistance this book would not have seen the light of the day.

We hope that this work will help realize to some extent Devkota's ambition of gaining international recognition for Nepalese literature. We rest assured that influential works will create an encouraged future. Since literature is said to feed the light of human awareness, let us see what the result will be.

Shyamdas Vaishnav
(Literary Co-ordination Committee
Nepal Cultural Association,

January 28. 1991

To The Reader

Art thou dead tired of all this fuss and fun ?
This cheap and weary life ? This kitten play ?
This endless nonsense ? Worthless foolery ?
Dead news in bold black mournings drummed to death ?
Reiterations of the machine's life ?
This busy stuppor ? And this pall of gloom ?
This dull dead dross today ? These lifeless hours ?
Come off the weight of all thy leaden skies,
Thy wall-eyed cities and thy modern death,
Sore sufferer ! O soul of lifeless man !
Into the word of quick antiquity,
Cry "Sesame" to the golden gate and in.
For here no poisoned air invades thy soul,
Here is no wilderness of foreign men,
But ancient souls of living dignity,
Quick with the spirit of the quickening past
Instil new life and animate thy soul.
The earth is younger, fresher are our hopes,
God rules the world. Far is not heaven for man.
Nature is intimately woven into life.
The mountains breathe, the verdant woods inspire,
And gods and angels walk the young earth still.
Talk to the ancient sage, his hoary beard
A depth of wisdom. Live the wood-land life
Fresh like the rosebud, dimpled like the rill
With nymphs and fairies. Mount the skies again
In chariots of gold, and with the gods be friends,
Enter into the souls of feeling things,
And feel the magic of the wondrous past.
The ancient ages live, old souls still act,
And man finds himself better in those days,
Rich like the stuff of dignified dreams.
Poor is this life, poor all thy cheap desires,
If thou revivest not the ancient fires.

CANTO ONE

Vishwamitra : the Terror of Heaven

In ancient Bharat, where the first day dawned
Resplendent on the snowpeak, myriad throats
Warbled sweet music to the scent of dew.
Auroral waves of morning colour spilt
Upon her firmament. The first fane, reared
To the Almighty's image, sparkled clear.
The first flower bloomed; and with its sacred flame
It taught the prompted sage to build and light
The primal altar, while with folded eyes
He heard a voice and felt a strong constraint.

Sing, goddess of the sacred book and lyre,
Saraswati upon thy snow-white swan
In robes of lily decked, a virgin pure,
Divinely featured, calm like prayer thou,
Thy beads of crystal coil around thine arm.
Prime source of knowledge and of wisdom grave,
Keeper of all the golden keys, O sing !
For we have lost our noble heritage:
Lost souls blind, errants from the path of Truth,
Dwarf children of the ancients, leanly live,
Deaf to the distant voices of the past,
Lethargic slaves of sad inertia,
We doubt ourselves, our gods, our noble faith.
O give us faith ! O animate the life
That slowly deadens into empty death !
The noble spirits of our fathers call
To quicken us. Awaken O the past !
Re-animated Bharat, rule our soul !
Resplendent pageant of the glorious past
Now re-display in soul-elating light

That we may find our faith and rise and rule !

Then sing, O Indian gooddess wise,
Of him who gave our Fatherland its name,
The name to honour with the life we love
Bharat our dearest country and our home,
Bharat his name— the great Dushyanta's cub
Say how the hero of our Fatherland
Came of a nymph of purest loveliness,
The sweetest angel that inhaled the dew,
In texture like the flowers she tended,
Her temper like their exhalation sweet.
Say how she first came, like a vernal bud,
God-sent, a little fairy in the woods,
When Penance, hard on its unshaken seat,
In its excess menaced the rule of heaven.
Say how, of winged minstrels nurtured, she
Was taken into Kanva's hermitage.
And as she grew, a fully-opened flower,
The great Dushyanta kohinoor of kings,
Saw her and fell in love. But Destiny
Perversely ruling made the two souls part
That loved each other like the *bailey* flower,
And sad oblivion for a period ruled
Making a tragedy that rent the heavens.
But when great Indra conquered demons all,
The lord Dushyanta, blind with night-dark fate,
Found his dead sense now dawning into light,
And with the pearl-drops streaming down his eyes
He clapsed the cast-off wife, his dearest gem,
Shakuntala. Her bosom heaved sore.

O Solitude, thou art the sage's home,
The wealth of saintly souls, the paradise
Of those who know the world's a hollow show.
For souls have found in thee the way to heaven.
Alive art thou with angels and with gods,

And blessed spirits haunt thy migic halls
In solemn silence; and the symphony
Of lucid beings, winged like the light,
Mounts up thine aerial towers of fairy-land.
Thou makest colonies of blessed lives
By fancy decorated. Thine's the dome
That works the wonders of the human mind;
For like the silent night with starlights hung
Thou twinklest wonders to the thoughtful eye
And leadest souls into the golden gate
Of other dawns by warbling voices filled.

Silence, thy sister, rules the world of souls
That meditate the great Almighty's power.
Green is thy grand domain, a brotherhood
Of leafy trees, cool nestlings to sweet wings
On giant mountains sleeping silently
In twilight consciousness on wooded slopes
Scarce visited by Day's own piercing eye.
Thou reignest o'er the sage's soul entranced
When he, in sleep as deep as Sesha-Shai's
Absorbed in God, hears warblings in his dream
And the sweet choirs in hymnal ecstasy;
And the perennial murmurs of the mountain brook
Pass into thrilling rills of breathless prayers
Running into the netted veins of life.
'Twas Shiva Saviour of our human world,
The God with trident, crescent-crowned, skin-clothed,
(And on his throat the dreaded *garal* gleams,
That poison that he drank for mankind's good
Converted to an azure gem), 'twas he
Who, with fair Ganga flowing down his locks
That matted were like ancient mountain woods,
Admired thy virgin estate on the snows
And fixed his eyes upon Himalay's peak
Styled Gauri-Shankar and the first light dawned.
Him have our sages followed for the search

Of Truth and God, secure upon their seats
Unshaken, by the lion and the panther
Gazed at and left in peace to find their heaven.

For hollow is this world, its wealth and power
Hollow, and empty like a dream this life.
Hollow the dome that envelopes our world.
Mountains must melt like snows upon their peaks,
And rosy-smiling Youth shall lose its flower:
For death is canker-worm upon their roots.
These things are but the empty shows of Time,
Dead stones like jewels on a royal brow
Whose power is but a puppet in a storm.
Fair mansions are a dark night's inn for dreams,
And fairest bodies are the clothes of change.
Death is the king of kings, the sovereign power
Over this world we ever call our own.
Naught have we men are own : 'tis Nature's debt;
Sweet poison do we drink of matter— then lie dead.
The snake, that eats the toad, itself is eaten
By the snouted mouse the mongoose called.
And day by day we waste and thin and die,
And, as a fist unclenches all our stuff
Droops as we looosen muscles, growing faint.
Then all the follies of our foolish life
Return with scorpion's stings to memory,
And deathless thought of things undone and done
Drives daggers into hearts that burn with shame.
"Oh God," our soul must cry and flee at last.

"If such is life....," The royal sage bent low
Alone within his royal garden rich,
Rich with the incense of the coloured flames,
Rich with the myriad children of the spring,
Rich with the bubbling fountains rainbow-hued
That broke the sparkling sunlight in their play,
Rich with the velvet green, the trailing lines

Of budding creepers touched to flower by nymphs
As in the vernal moonlight on their toes
They trip a light dance to the bubbling spring.

"If such is life......," The marble palace white,
Carved by the chisel into arches fair,
Smiled in the lunar beams, its towers rich
With all the blossoms of the spring of life
Arrayed with art in fairest ornament.

"If such is life," The contemplative king
Went sadly on, "This palace is a toy,
A sport for every breeze that sways the branch;
It is a dream in marble, doomed to death.
These maids are puppets on those airy towers
Destined to fall. Wherefore, my soul, art thou
Lost in this wilderness of hollow grandeur ?
Get thee to mountain solitudes and pray
For these illusions. Take thy soul deceived
And there sad wisdom born of suffering
Shall make Eternity a sea of tears.
Quick ! For moments run like grains of sand,
Like drops of water fall the liquid hours,
And no-one's here the drowning soul to save.
"Too late, too late, the twinkling stars bewail !
Be up and haste my soul ! —This life is fleet."
Then like a man that dreads the doom of death,
The sword that hangs but by a single hair,
In breathless haste the meditative king
Fled like a ghost from luxuries of home,
Heedless of all except the life he knew
Would save his soul from overhanging doom.

The Minister scarce grasped the King's resolve,
Scarce dared to grasp; then quickly running up
He called upon the hastening King to stop:
"Come back, my lord; thou hast no right to flee.

The pilot shall not leave the helm when storms
Are brewing, when the storm clouds gather dark.
Our God is grasped through man alone. Penance
Is in this field of conflict, in this world:
The hermit's cave is doubly dark and grim,
Distant from man and black with lone dismay;
It kills the noble action of the soul,
It seals the eyes and deadens all the heart.
The selfless work for human benefit:
The hero's sphere of action's in the field.
The active virtues and the harder way
To heaven through the light of living gods
Thou seekest to forsake, in craven flight
Into the coward's den, behind green screens
Foreign to God's own light. Here in thy realm
God calls thee, noble king, to kingly deeds!
Dost thou desire Gods' kingdom ? Here it is
In human hearts of love and sympathy.
Dost thou desire the blessing of the gods ?
On men who work for men down blessing comes ?
Dost thou desire the hardship of the sage ?
On beds of thorns repose, taste bitter words,
Begrudge the satisfaction of thy wants,
Forget thyself in men to find thy God
And in the cave of truthful isolation
Close both thine eyes upon the empty lies !
O king, flee not these necessary woes
That sting thee into sense. This world's a test:
Flee not but stand and take thy merit's marks.
Where wilt thou go : Into the caveman's peace ?
Ten million voices call; finding thee not
They curse thy selfish hours, thy lonely calm
For when closed eyes shall blink to Truth and Light
Thou wilt regret and say, "Oh, he was right !"

For just one moment paused the frightened king
And said, "This world is ruled by God's own will.

We are no rulers, tiny is our power.
We sway the world with rods of doom and fear,
And yet man's soul, untamed, its ill still works.
Frail are we reeds, our follies countless, we
Impose upon the mighty multitude
A human will unpurified of dross,
Unchastened of the dirty driving self.
Our art is human: we, the rulers, flesh,
Blind like the common mortal kings of earth
Must say they see; deaf like the snake, they hear.
This artificial mode, this human sway,
Is sadder than the terror of the dark:
Our souls, guilt-stained with lies ourselves have told,
Regret our ev'ry act, our ev'ry step regret,
For lots of hearts are wounded, lots are plagued
We know not how. Kings arrogate a power
For which to God whose subjects are we all
Presumptious slaves they must account. The world
Is neither brighter nor more prosperous
For all we do, in spite of all our vaunts.
How shall he rule that hath not ruled himself ?
So must I to the solitudes repair
Of snowy mountains and the leafy woods.
The soul that finds its peace, its truth, its God,
Works more than all the heroes of the world
In silence for the benefit of man.
By truth the world is ruled. I go to find
That truth I find not in these idle haunts.
Return Amatya for my will is made."

Then, like a ghost, the royal sage ran fleet;
Nor fleeter is the stag that sees dread death,
Grim-jawed, with flaming eyes and iron claws,
Ready to pounce upon its careless pause
Out from behind a screen of treachery.
Through bouldered wildernesses lone and dry
He passed; through deserts parched and scorched;

Up wearying crags, down gulleys, gorges grim,
Through thickets, o'er the sharp-edged rocky flints,
Along the winding ways of mountain rills,
Till to *Godavari's* banks he came and paused.

More sacred is no spot on earth the scene
Impressive; for the forest, rich in leaf
And spreading branch and bending twig and flower,
Touched by the magic of the Indian spring,
Speaks with the voices of a joyous choir
Beneath white towers of raining blossoms rich,
And waves its silken hands of tasselled green
To sweet Malaya on its northward course.
The stream is warm and prompts the cuckoo-bird
With spurs of vernal, newly-burgeoned shoots
To call God *Surya* on his chariot
Of *vibgyor* to his spring-time equinox.
It weaves green screens of finest-patterned leaves
For mating birds that woo with melodies.
A red haze thinly veils the morning sky.
Lord Krishna with his fairy beauties plays
Upon his forest flute. The coloured dust
Of *Falgun hori* on the flowers fall,
Some veiled in folded bud, some open faced
Shaking their lovely heads to say "Oh, , no !"
While ripples dimple fair Godavari,
And pollens shower on the *Radhika*
The Lord's own love, the Beauty that presides
This world of play, May-Queen to *Brindaban*.
The leaves begin to dance. In rhythmic waves
The sea-breeze sways the branches bursting full.
The peach in blossom, faintly colourful,
Is grazed by swallows' wings as soft as flowers.
The cranes wing northward in their numerous waves
Of spring migration. The spring-time's blossoms
Now faintly scent the air. Pomegranates
Begin to drink their crimson honey-glass

Envied of bumble-bees, now all their stings
Turn'd to glossy joys. The jasmine fair
With ornaments of golden tubes is decked.
The *Kanak-champa,* hot with wanton scent,
Breaks like a fairy's lotus from her case
Of bristling silken brown. The curl'd leaf
Buds out, its length increasing to the sun.
Large-eyed gazelles now rub their glossy coats
Upon the roughened bark of weathered trunks.
Doves coo. The pigeons call their mates and wheel
And circle somersaulting in the air.
The wanton belles of woods in fair array
Call with their new-born fragrance working-bees
To fertilise. New life, new joy now wait
Upon the ruling verdure of fresh youth
In vernal bowers, and the morning dew
Makes pendants of its lustrous pearly drops
To scent the air with balmy-sweet perfume.

Yet not these beauties, but the solitude,
The verdant calm, the promise rich and fair
Of life rejuvenated in a Paradise
Of sweetest contemplation godwise turned
Took now the royal heart. Vishwamitra
Admired the scene awhile: in it he saw
New life, new birth, fresh hopes—and Paradise !

The river with her crystal currents ran,
Afraid to pause, a winding hymn of praise,
Through forests dense to find her ocean Lord;
Against the rocks lamenting; carving out
A course of crying search in solitude.
Not by palaces did she pause, nor all
The luxuries of silk and velvet craved,
But like a maiden to her lover running
She slid beneath the stars on her clear course

Of dutiful devotion. For she must
Her own lord find lamenting through the woods.
"Thus do all souls their proper havens seek,"
Mused Vishwamitra, sunk in deepest thought.
He found a stony seat with soft green moss
Halfwet, beneath a spreading giant old
Three centuries in years, yet blooming still
Like some stout veteran hungering still for life.

There squatting in the proper pose he sat,
His body motionless, breathless in prayer,
His naked body open to the winds,
His eyes in-turning lifted to the light.
Three wrinkles creased his fair majestic brows.
Life paused; the soul entranced, the mind
Inactive to the world. Lord Krishna's flute
Waxed louder yet as up the spirit came
Nearer and nearer to its ruling god.
And space was filled with other beings pure,
And Time was filled with other elements.
Nor space was felt nor time its motion made;
But all the elements, their prime source touched,
Were one: nor past nor future broke the calm
Nor came there ever time's disturbing waves
To lash the sacred fastness of the heart.
One light alone illumed the world : all forms,
To single form converted, moved the Lord.
The tasteless tongue disdaining earthly food
Now felt a taste that never earth could give,
Amrit, the juice divine now touched its tip.
Its dead weight shed the body was not there,
Nor felt it aught that leaden weight which hangs
Upon the soul in godless states of sleep.
The weight of all the universe was gone.
Buoyed up in some ethereal plane of light
The spirit felt emancipated, free.
Death had no stings: it was transcended. Soul

Was everything—the flesh's tug had ceased.
Lord Krishna filled the world. His lute was life:
The veins of all the universe were filled
With music; and the music was all life.
Thus years rolled on. Much water ran to sea,
And myriad leaves were shed like myriad men,
So many seasons danced and went their way.
But he remained unshaken in his seat.

Grim will, that grinds the flesh and lifts the soul,
Undaunted by the mountains and the rocks,
Rooted to solid principle, by Truth alone
Governed, will shake the very throne of heaven,
Aspiring high to God's own mighty power.
And so it did! For *Indra*, God of Heaven,
One morning felt his left brow twitch. His bolt
Shook in his mighty hand; his lofty throne
Felt insecure, for from the earth a pulse
Was mounting up to his own lofty height.
He sat, the mighty Indra, thunder's god,
Around his head a brilliant aureole
And garlands fresh dew-spangled; brooding deep,
Dark brooding o'ver the symptoms of the dark,
Conjecturing an evil destiny.

All snow and rose came *Rambha*, winged nymph.
Silk-cinctured came she, sandal-shod,
Coiling a wreath of scented jasmine round
The milk-white thickness of her lovely arm.
Down folded wings cascade her tresses; and
Through thinnest veil her beauty shyly peeps.
She threw the garland round the great lord's neck,
And in a cup of brightly-burnished gold
She poured sweet nectar white as lotus-dew
That shimmered with its quiv'ring, short-lived beads,
And raised it slowly to the great lord's lips.
Slow-bending was her posture, heaving breast,

Rose-red the colour of her flushing cheeks,
Her eyes shy drooping. But the Lord of Heaven
In sullen silence kept her waiting long,
Then shook his head, and bit his lips, and said,
"Not now !". The disappointed Rambha felt
Her red cheeks burn with shame. She turned and fled.
Then twittering rumour through the palace ran,
Through marble halls, through corridors and rooms
Of rose and emerald and lapis lazuli,
The mighty lord of heaven had a care,
A mortal twinge, a sharp anxiety
A tiny cloud, a crack in the serene.

That day there came the ministers of heaven:
Grave like the mountains, hoary as the snow
These god-advisers to the mighty crown,
Mellow as autumn. And the council sat
For hours in solemn silencing listening
To what the Lord of Heaven had to say.
Uprose the great premier of the Blessed Land,
Uprose and spake: "The grim and mighty will
Of aspirants is hard like hills to shake.
The mountains tremble to thy thunder, Lord,
But *they* shrink not, lost in the absorbing will.
Yet there's a way for them: we stir their lust
Now nearly choked to death by penance hard,
Revive desires that like the weeds decay,
Sow seeds of earthly craving in their minds,
Turn eyes in-looking out to lovely forms,
And with the spells of beauty bind them fast.
For the repression of the instincts fills
The chocked will full, brimful; then passions choked
Still seek some outlet-mortal nature casts
Her sad slough only on the heights of heaven.
Still there is time: sage Vishwamitra yet
Still lives on earth. We shall our fairest nymph
Choose from the galaxy of loveliest stars

And send her down to win his mighty soul.
The danger lies not in aspiring for
A heaven to rule, but in acquiring it.
Still heaven hath spells for him, though great his pains
At penance dire. Our fairest star of light
Can win his soul to earthly luxury."

All eyes now beamed; Indra alone sighed soft.
"Fair *Menaka* out-shines the fairest stars
Of heaven," one voice declared; "for gifts she has
Beyond the talents of the common nymphs:
She dances like the lightning, light as air;
She sings like summer showers on wooded slopes;
She hath a way of winning mortal hearts
As hath no other. Let us send her down
To win the iron-willed to earthly ways."

So this was done, with general consent,
At sunset on the day the council fixed,
When sun-god *Surya* in his fairest robes
Of glittering gold the western summits graced.

CANTO TWO

Vishwamitra and Menaka

Like an unshaken boulder, green with age,
Unshaken by the storm and by the flood,
All motionless but for the lichen's growth,
Firm at the foot of giant mountains where
The thawing spring releases rapid floods
And robins lave their wings in little pools
Caught by the tree-trunk of the raging flood;
Unshaken in his seat the royal sage
Vishwamitra, beneath the spreading bough,
Felt not the summer heat nor winter hoar
Nor falling autumn nor the waves of spring:
Godavari, the sacred river, ran,
The fair-faced washer of the sins of men.
Admired of all the ancient sages, she,
In holy currents swirling, rounded off
The pebbles' angles, smiling pearlily,
And washed the mossy boulders' velvet edge
With kissing waters gently lapping on.

Aditya, God of Light, Apollo called
By Greeks of old, in sunset robes bestrode
The coloured edge of dream-shaped clouds and tuned
His golden lyre to Ocean's wave-plucked song.
From off this vantage point he filled the woods
With music, striking chords of ringing gold
In softest melody, a lovely hymn
That homing wings admired in wreathed flight
That tinged the woods of spring and worked their spells
On fair Godavari, her rose-strewn breast
Heaving to every breath of budded time.

Lo ! Where the clouds a golden archway make
Lit by the lamps of heaven lightly poised,

With rosy garlands decked, the western gate
Of heaven opes and winged nymphs appear.
Rose-lips, beneath the beams of lit-up eyes
By fair emotion touched, curved into smiles
At sight of earth unfolded in her spring.
They peer; they gently nudge; they twinkle eyes;
(Nor lovelier gazelles in springtime light)
Shrug wings; touch butter cheeks with both their hands;
Flush with the beauty of a woman's soul.
They twist to cast a woman's look upon
The fluttering edges of their silken robes
Describing curves that grace a painter's brush
In charming bends of plastic loveliness.
Their breasts heave lightly—hidden bells just struck
To lightest tone. Their silken cinctures tend
To loosen, and they tighten up the knots.
Some smooth the heaving waves of hair displaced
Where wanton winds presumptuous touches steal.
On tip-toe some, while peeping round the necks
Of fairy friends, tug robes and disarrange
Their folds aligned—and scolding looks invite !
Some softly bite rose—lips with shining pearls;
Some point at seas of gold and some at hills,
Their crows aflame with setting splendours, where
The golden Sun-god casts his lingering smile.

Menaka, summoning all her courage, smelt
The deathless rose of heaven. Brushing brows
And sweetly redd'ning, nervously she smiled:
"My fairy friends ! I feel an earthly fear
To drop so low to earth where cares abound.
Far rougher are the fibres of all things
The earth possesses: flowers bloom on thorns,
And beauties weep, they say, and fair youth fades.
Look where Godavari, the sacred thread,
Winds like a serpent to her lord the sea.
The wooded hills like azure jewels rise

Upon the breast of earth. Vishwamitra
There rock-like sits in penance as I hear.
Great is the king and greater yet the sage
In him grim-willed. I fear his soul, his might.
Unshaken may he prove for all my art.
The zephyr maids may play their wanton pranks
Around his tree, pull out its budded leaves,
Pour colour on its boughs, light crimson flames
With loving tips, perfume its verdant youth,
Play rustling on its twigs, enticing sing:
Yet, deaf, those iron rocks of rooted will
Will shake with fury, striking quakes of wrath
In angry rage that threatens all the world."

She blushed and drooped. But all the lovely nymphs
Encouraging encircled her and said,
"Like weeping willow droop not, Menaka, do not droop.
With fairy firmness pluck thy courage up,
Thou fairest witch of Indra's paradise!
Thy charms are telling and thy voice a spell.
No mountain cataract in moonlight danced
In richer tones of varying melodies,
Spelling a sleep profound on neighbouring woods.
Thou art, sweet dancer, quicker than the flash
Of summer heaven, richer than the rains;
Thy curves are thrilling and thy limbs are spells:
Lighter than petals canst thou drop thy feet
And hold the hearts of men in silken leash.
Born sorceress of beauty, fear not, go!
The wrath of sages shall be cool as sand
When o'er the desert hot the lunar witch
Sheds brilliance, enchanting all the earth."

Faintly she smiled, the fairy Menaka,
And smelt again the death-less rose of heaven:
"My lord's behest," she said, "I can't gainsay,
So shall I drop to earth and try my art,

Yet with a doubt and with a trembling heart."
One brushed the beads upon her snow-white brow
With lotus leaves; another gently .touched
Her lips with paradisal rose; a third
Re-clasped her breast-knot. The fair Menaka
Reddening smiled as asmiles the rose of June.
"Vishnu," she cried, "O give me strength and hope."
She for a moment closed her lovely eyes
Like lotus in the night: the fair lids down,
The lashes motionless. And new strength came
Like vernal fragrance stealing through the air.
Her breasts she heaved; she breathed a cool relief,
Opened her eyes, and smiled again, and looked
Far down into the hollows of the earth.
Then up she looked as proud as queen of May.
Her folded wings she stirred and opened wide
And raised herself upon her dainty toes,
And leaning forward leapt adown the clouds.
Her wings were whirring music, like the leaves
Of gardens hanging in Nepal's fair vale
When rains set in to end the summer heat.
Lighter on buoying air the summer gossamer
N'er floated down, nor cloud-rack on the blue.
Lighter the lark hath never breasted air
Above his dewy nest at early dawn.
The nymph of heaven floated for a space
As fully-opened lilies float on rills,
Borne on the currents of the upper air:
So doth the circling kite, at early morn,
Poised on his spreading wings, without a wheel,
Without a whir or flap or fluttering,
Bent earthward with its keep, sad, scouring eyes,
Search out a sparrow's young , its morning meal.

High on her heavenly flight with wings out-spread,
Her eyes bent earthward, she, the heavenly nymph,
Saw earth, her beauties open to the air.

Large plains, green-blue, into the distance stretched;
High hills of azure to her sight were dwarfed
To anthills, valleys deep to narrow clefts.
Rivers were silver threads in bluish haze,
Temples-mere puppets hard to be discerned;
A place was a doll's house, and a city fair
A sea of lowly roofs; roads ran like lines
Of paint on canvas, and the forests blue
Blue patches made, blue patterns on a screen.

Descending nearer to the earth she saw
Godavari upon its wayward course,
A pebble-dancer, with its rapid swirls
Rounding the rocks and washing boulders green,
Fringed by its forests rich in leaf and flower.
Networks of branches hid the writhing trunks,
A leafy world for happy, horned things,
And winged songsters. Here *Vanaspati,*
The Lord of woods, did rule his sylvan realm
Green-laurelled by the spring. His crown of flowers
The naiads wove in plaits of full-fledged buds.
A choir of birds chanted its evening prayer,
Mansioned in leafy bowers wet with dew,
By playful breezes fanned. Vanaspati,
The monarch of the woods, his subjects rear
In forest cities where the homes are trees,
Where floral carpets deck the velvet ground
And scented sweetness fills the dewy air.
Their wants are few and they are satisfied
To sing the glory of their monarch wild
In boscages and bowers, 'neath the boughs,
A happy lot, all sleek and neat and fair.
Menaka touched the earth. She laid her hand
Upon a branch of snow-white blossom, saw
The grim-willed king austere, Vishwamitra,
His matted locks all brown in braided lines
Like Shiva's in his mountain solitude.

Broad brows of majesty in lucid pride
Wrinkled in triple line. His eyes upturned
Were closed as frost-shut amaranthine buds.
He scarcely breathed; his ample arms were limp,
The palms upturned. He squatted on his legs,
Absorbed in meditation, fancy free,
He looked a giant with a hero's make,
Born majesty, the proudest kshatriya
Aspiring after heaven and the power
That souls married to Truth alone possess.

She paused and trembled. For the mighty man
Looked grimmer than the thunder of her Lord,
As far above earth's lowly human lusts
As gods of heaven are above all men
Austerely towering o'er the wicked world.

"*Vishnu !*", she prayed, "now lend me strength divine,
For harder than the mountain is my task.
This rock will never shake: 'twill baffle art,
Drive me to blushing shame, and dreadful curse
Alighting on my soul will blast its joys."
Up-looking then a miracle she saw:
The sun-god Surya lingered on the cloud !
More brilliant still his rays did shower
Like music falling on the banked clouds.
The golden gate of heaven open stayed.
Her friends, the fair-faced fays, uprose
And peered with wonder on the earth below
While heaven's king, the mightiest of kings,
The thunder-bearer, monarch of the gods,
Indra himself was visible in heaven !
Airabat swung forth slow, celestial beast,
His mighty bulk, in rhythm balancing
The golden *howdah* strapped athwart his back.
As paragons of paradise began
To light the lamps of day's end glowing pink,

There rose a warbling on the wooded slopes
Sweeter than lutes, a blended melody.
Godavari now blushed as blush the brides
In fine array to temple freshly taken;
And Cupid, Madan called, Ananga fair,
The bodiless, the god of love and grace,
Appeared upon the scene, his flower-shaft
Tipped with the flame of love, sharpened point
To pierce the heart of fair, impassioned youth.
Though once, chastised by Shiva's flaming eyes,
His body burned to ash, the handsome god
Could not restrain his nature's prompting voice
But wandered through the woodlands seeking prey
To aim his shafts of flowers that flame and fire,
A naked fowler, fairest of the males.

Fair Menaka was now a blushing rose.
By heaven's sign encouraged, swift the nymph
Made light her breast-knot graced with amaranth,
Re-fastened with a throbbing heart her belt,
Cast glances at the slimness of her waist
And at the swelling sculpture of her hips,
And side-long looks, with hesitation shy,
She turned to heav'n -till scold her conscience stung.
Then with a will composed her half-nude dance
Began, a self-lost actress prompt to mood:
She danced as ripples dance in foothill rills
Babbling on pebbles in their fairy rounds,
Sparkling to light, bright – gemmed in pearly smiles.
Soft music came from the aerial lutes,
Soft rang the tinkling bells upon her feet.
Like birds she sang; like ripples rang the bells;
Like flowers moved her feet; like rhythmic waves
Her camphor hands of deathless beauty made
Fine magic movements as she bent and turned.
The blades of vernal grass beneath her feet
Bent to the gentle touch and, smiling, reared

Their gentle tops unharmed, grown brighter green.
The blushing creepers flowered into smiles.
Birds swung their rainbow tails on blossoms rich.
Gazelles and antelopes with large bright eyes
Forgot to graze the leaves,their ears erect.
The breeze, the steeler of the forest's soul
Of fragrance, languid grew, the flowers' blooms
Loosened their veils and richly smiled with joy.
She was a flower, singing like a bird
With coral-tinted tongue. Soft were the tones,
As soft as river-pearls that seek a way
Against the stream, run silver clusters back,
Then float defeated—glorious in defeat,
The flow as sweet as sparkling was the ebb !
Sweet, silver chords from bowered paradise
Rang tender-toned upon the scented air,
As music plays to listening, dew-wet flowers
When fairies dance in early-morning time
And flaunt a flame of passion lily-white
In numbers struck from rainbows. Should a man
Or see or hear, he would return to earth
In lunacy, a soul by music crazed
And grace of limb surpassing music's flow.

Menaka sang of love: the love that rules
The stars, the flowers and the universe;
How all the world began in love to end
In all-consuming love. "In every grain,"
She sang, "there is a throbbing heart of love."
Without it every grain would be at war,
In conflict atoms all. And God did make
This world in love for all to feel His love,
And one another love. Lord Vishnu made
This world of wond'rous beauty for his wife,
Queen Lakshmi, as a gift of purest love:
The beauties of this world, her ornaments;
Its voices but the utterings of His love.

The flow of music through her heart descends
And swirls through all her veins in network warm.
It quickened fitting motions in her limbs:
Time turned to rhythm sweet; Space became
A field of art that moved with ebb and flow;
The elemental beauties of the world
Carried the soul to life's beginnings. Stars
From empty voids in rhythmic lines descend,
Waves of the first light throb, first waters flow,
Earth undulates in balance to Time's beat,
Life pulses, palpitates with love profound.

They say when Orpheus played his magic lyre
The power of his music bent the hills:
The ocean throbbed, the trees responding ran;
Yet those who hear the story of our Lord
The *Bansi-Dhari*, Bearer of the Lute,
In scornful unbelief reject the tale.
But if these strains enrapturingly soft
They could have heard, repentant would they come
To Krishna's temple and their incense burn.
For as she sang, the very skies went rose;
The earth grew conscious of her very soul:
Forgotten memories of paradise
Came winging like a sunset-flight of birds.
The tender creepers smiled, in green array,
And dropped in rich profusion pollen grains,
As ladies fair in some great dancing-hall
Drop smiles with beaming eyes, like charity.

Brisk swung the waist of fairy Menaka,
A lovely line of sculpture, liquid-light.
The gracious fingers interlocked. The arms
In supple sweetness bent, fair ornaments
Of orient dance. Her brows of pencilled black
Were foils to brighter eyes; her head inclined.
Her legs in finest silk the folds of art

Outlined. She poised her tinkling feet in swift
Advance, shot forward movements neat and trim;
Then neat and trim retired. Circling next,
A sudden lightning flash of coloured dress,
She alternated poses, sweet surprise
To the observing eye. Fine muscles, full
Pliant to quickened will and supple art,
In mystic symbols moved the tune to time.
Expression coincided, singing sweet
Agreement to the nature of her dance,
An oriental luxury to eye
And ravished ear, enrapturingly sweet.
Words winged and fluttered in the sylvan air,
And all the beauties of the living world
Dropped from her lips and from her rhythmic hands,
Painted and coloured in symbolic form.
O ravishing, O ravishing her dance
And song!

The naked cupid pausing gazed,
A pensive finger on his coral lip.
His eyes were wide with wonder; and his barb
Of painted bloom lay on the bow-string taut.
Still motionless the royal sage grim-willed
Sat stable as a mountain boulder firm,
Firm on his mossy seat, unshaken, fixed;
And ageless hills looked down in silent awe.
The *Malaya* maids, whose homes beyond the sea
Are coral-made and lined with pearly shells
That rocking waters cradle, sweet with spice,
Came on their vernal pilgrimage to heights
And hills where wind the streamlets serpentine;
Fair winged winds are they who hide the blush
Of maiden beauty with the tasselled fans
Of budding sprouts of spring. They bring as gifts
Translucent pearls they hang on morning boughs.
Enthrall'd by the exquisite strains, they touched

The *rishi's* roughened sides with gentle hands,
Liquid like air, invisible to eye.
Sweet exhalations came from breathing blooms
Quickened to music. And the Sorcerer
Of Paradise, the lunar-god *Sashi*,
Came smiling cool, the fairest youth of heav'n.
Clasping the hare he loved in snow-white arms.
Cold nectar had he drunk; and all his beams
Shed nectared coolness on the softened earth.
Full slow he walked, the slow, luxurious youth,
Among the moon-blue woods: his *Revati*
Him shadowed, queen of eastern night-time sky,
And ranged her band of twinkling stars in line.
The light he shed cast magic shadows round
And shaped the spirits of earth's day-time forms.
The boulder even on the river's bank
Bloomed to his tender beams: his magic spell,
To fairy music wedded, made the hills
To smile, and thrilled the springing blades of grass.

Music, a wizard art thou to the ear !
Thy dancing sweetens air and brings a light
That pours upon us thrilling waves of joy,
As fine as gossamer. Thy magic veil
Protects the soul from day's long weariness.
Awakener of all sleeping memories,
Thou pulse of life, thou rhythm in the heart !
At thy behest wake souls in darkness lost.
Softer than cherubs' wings thou flutterest.
Finer than flowers' fragrance lingerest thou
Within the soul upon a wakened sense.
Of god-made things the most elusive thou !
The starry heavens circle rhythm-borne,
Yet gentle as a dove in hearts abides
Thy love, enslaving souls. Thy motion's power
Cuts time itself into oblivion;
Chisells dreams from out the void; heals souls.

God's angels hymn His glory's utterance
In thee. Thou art the movement of the world,
At thy command all things created dance,
And in thy voice man speaks a higher tongue.

Could he, the royal sage on soul-heights bleak
Aspiring lonely, lone resist thy power ?
Like memories of love in men turned stones
The notes revived his slowly-dying soul.
Through darkened windows of his deadened sense
The sweetness filtered, just as mercury
Will sparkle round a window's iron bars,
And touched the slowing pulse of dying life,
A magic quickening. His eyelids throbbed,
A light, a shaft of abstract colour, struck
His dull imagination. Spring he felt
As feels the granite rock in Falgun's time.
He dreamt of greening shoots and burgeoning buds
And whispering breezes; and the sunlight slow
With warmth and fragrance touched his secret heart.
Yet grimly still his hard, rough features stood.

A maid possessed, when waves a conjuror's wand,
Will slow revive; so slowly now did he
The evil spirit exorcise. His pale
Lips reddened; moved his blinkless eyes
Their first few flutterings; his breath oppressed,
When now the weight of tortured silence dropped,
Slow gaspings drew; his pale, thin hands blue-veined
Slow groped; and slow he turned from side to side,
As earthly memories in his mind revived.
Entranced the sage reverted to the world.
Once more his eyes closed as the sunflower buds
In starry nights close; slowly throbbed. The blood
Informed the heaved-up vein upon the lids,
And as an owl to daylight wakes, so he
Blinked, dazzled by the strength of worldly light
A second's time. His ears, adjusting quick,

Caught something sweeter than the Lord's own lute,
Sweet music's bells, the tender tones of song.
At last, uneasily, the eyelids fell,
The eyes straight looked. The sage bewildered sat,
Like one who from a dream just hears a call;
Uncertain of the voice he rubs his eyes
And with a strain attempts to see and know,
'Twixt sleep and waking on the boundary lost.

As moves the flower conscious of the bee,
More briskly yet tripped light the knowing maid.
Her woman's soul was bent on victory:
She poured ecstatic strains of melody
As consciously the mating songbird sings.
For woman, chiselled by the sculptor's art,
Was made for man: for man her flowing lines,
Her blushing spells of sweet, shy magic made;
The artful drooping of the mateless maid
In sad seclusion quickens to the dream
Of Cupid-sculptured males of handsome grace.
For man informs the woman, works her spells,
Touches with rose the virgin-snow of flesh,
And heaves her breasts with rhythmic sentiment.
Man gives the quickening pulse to throbbing limbs
And lights the beam beneath the fringe'd lash
And works the magic of her sweetened voice.
Man points desire of conquest, graces her
With ornaments that speed the flow of life.
And all the art that in the marble lies
Dormant, 'tis man that stimulates to life.
A lovely woman, conscious of her charms,
As in the sun a flower throbs and buds,
Bewitching spells with double force acquires,
And finds a sweetness never known before,
Thus danced Menaka, bird of Paradise:
Emotion's motion quickened in her heart
The triumph-dream that ever'y woman acts.

Informed of love her stature seemed to grow
And love transformed her to enchantress sweet.
Spring touched her voice to songbird's haunting tongue
That rang with wanton movement like a bell.
Heav'n smiled, they say, just at the time benign
When starry night bewitched the softened blue:
0 sage, 0 sage, 0 royal sage, forbear !
For woman is a temptress, sweet but sad,
Than flowers sweeter, sadder than the thorns;
An evil spell; a flame upon the marsh;
A short-lived light that burns the dancing moths;
A desert mirage leading on to sands
Bone-bleaching; tinsel, dress's flashy show;
Fair puppet ornamented, childish doll;
A thirsty sorc'ress, life-consuming flower !
She puts on poison'd bloom a honey drop;
She blooms and fades as fast as any rose;
She steals, a mistress of an art of lies;
She queens it o'er a dotard, cruel fair,
And makes him slobber like a rutting beast.
She sings a siren-song from treach'rous rocks.
But man is warned in vain; for like a bumble-bee
Her silk-robed signal he can n'er reject:
Her fair form's fooleries ever men befool !
E'en thou, great king and sage of might grim-willed,
Like butter meltest, granite though thou art !
To gather adamantine *Sheelajit*
With wat'ry brush they wet the aged rocks !

Shrewd, artful Menaka, from jet-cornered eyes
While dancing casts her knowing glances round
And cunningly takes distance as she moves.
The farther off the woman, clever soul,
The nearer comes the male in brisk advance.
So now the nymph turns east to accost the moon
That waxes on the dark mount's silhouette
And patterns vernal tree-shapes on its slope

Washed by Godavari's waves. No oratory,
No painter's brush fine-bristled would suffice
To paint with weight exact the magic line
Her back designed: it was the stuff of dreams !

A downy silk-cased worm, a serpent coiled,
The leaf celestial nourishes of mulberry.
The fruit with grained green, on spring-time boughs
As white as camphor, bristles; ripening, turns
Into a crimson sunset's luscious glow;
And silken threads exiguous provides
That glorify angelic frames divine.
The curling leaves in Falgun warm their lengths
And butterflies of heaven nestle there,
Far brighter than the ones your childhood chased
—For heav'n allows no killing in its fields !
From dust down-dropping off their wings
Fine cloths they make and dip in rainbow-dyes
Their fairy dancers fairly to array.

The Elysian stuff now backward flying, tossed
By the persuasive breezes' gentle touch,
Unveiled such limbs no mortal eye will glimpse.
The sage himself did half espy the knee,
Its fine proportions quick revealed-concealed !
The maiden paused; her dress danced on the wind
While, swaying, lost in song, she hymned the moon
Whose beams her profile sculptured as she sang:
And all her song was like a misty dream
Of faery music, rich, intangible.
And as she paused, uprising asked the sage:
"Who mayst thou be fair dancer of the woods ?
Thou singest sweet: art naiad, dryad, fay,
Or *Apsara* or *devee*, ocean nymph
Or lunar goddess, earth s' fair daughter-which ?
Art paragon of Indra's paradise
Or some Caucasian fairy ? Tell me, maid !

Than sweetness sweeter are thy winning looks !
But why alone, unguarded, wanderest thou,
Most precious jewel, winged ecstasy
Of voice divine and beauty chiselled fair ?
Thou dancer of the woods, unveil and say."

But coyly shrinking, artless artfully,
Shrewd scenter of the soul, the bashful nymph
With gazelle-eyes low bent, with conscious hands
That smoothed her wanton saree frivolous
(The winds too frolicsome for modesty !)
Blushed like a stranger first addressed in words
Too meaningful, too charged with feeling high.
Provocatively slow and calorously cool,
She touched her cheeks, her silky tresses smoothed,
Subduing flutters in her bounding heart:
For dignity dictates to all the fair,
When fair advances come, a cool reserve.

The sage his beads forgot, *Rudraksha* nuts
And rosary prayers: he prayed, solicitous,
Her flutt'ring wings to stay and not to go.
He sank on knees, despair and hope between
Rough-torn; and bold'ned further, touched her hem
Of rustling silk, vicariously sweet.
The tug of alabaster-nestled cloth,
Though gentle, startled Menaka's resting form
As rough hands groping startle virgin maids
Or flowers start when fanned by morning's breeze.
But he, the passion-tamer, let not go
The luscious hold—so sweet the touch to him
Of such divine delight, such nymphish grace.

"Touch not, O Wise One ! Wrath will fall, I fear,
For holy men are holy, thus untemptable.
The lovely lake may tempt the virgin clouds
And play awhile: then falls the thund'rous bolt
And tears and rends her bosom heaving-blue.

Great souls are distant things to beauty's touch,
For humble salutation, not for love
For woman pulls the soul of men adown
The heights of heaven, squandering its force.
Fair forms, they say, incur a dreaded sin
If they seduce by beauty godly souls,
Robbing great penance of her saintly dues.
So, Sage, forbear ! Thy now deluded soul
One day, alive to folly, will pronounce
Dread curse upon the penance-tamperer,
And I, undone, shall weep eternal tears."

A burst of mocking laughter shook the sage:
"Is that the reason why thou shrinkest so ?
I am a prince of noblest ancestry:
To womankind, of gallant chivalry
My heart is full, and full my noble soul
Of noble instincts, not of odious hate.
I know that woman is man's way to heaven
And stimulates his soul gross though it be.
To peace she calls him, peace celestial,
And love she teaches, minist'ring angel fair,
That keeps the errant vagabond at home
Held by a golden chain. A mistress kind,
She rules the coltish passions witchingly
And makes a fairy land of weary Earth !
A woman's beauty comes from God, and if
It wins by grace a man's soul mortified
It leads that soul to truth by beauty's path.
For Truth is beauty, casting, as it comes
To earth, a spell of soul-elating power
That conjures out all grossness, all impure,
Material dross, and draws the soul to God
Through forms that simulate His majesty.
Me needst thou fear ? No Durbasha am I
Inexorably firm. I am no Shukadev,
An early renegade to home and hearth;

No Shiva's flaming eye that burnt Madan.
Alive am I to beauty, and to love
This old heart still is stirred, my veins do thrill.
Was ever there an eye that saw thy form
And never visioned nymph-full Paradise ?
Accept me, nymph, as slave to lotus feet,
An incense-burner to a temple fair!
Tell me thy name; and tell me if thou canst
On aging branch a bud new-grafted stay !"

With eyes down-cast she blushed : "I am a nymph,
An apsara of Indra' s paradise
Whom Toombooro taught music, Bharat taught
Upon the stage of heav'n to play a part.
My name is Menaka, thy humble slave.
Upon my soul a curse has been imposed
That for a minor fault of acting's art
On earth a full year's season must I live.
But born of heav'n free desires I feel
That human will, restricting, curbs. I hate
The tyranny of all restraint and check.
My nature must pursue its natural course
Or I shall fade like earthly flower that falls
From parent-stalk upon the storm-tossed dust."

"Repected shall they be, all thy desires:
Thou shalt be free as vernal winds are free.
Tuned to the vibrant chords within thy heart
My soul shall rise and fall in terraced scales:
Thou shalt be fragrance, free to wander forth,
If but thou wilt, when tired of errant ways,
Returning to my bosom find thy home."

The paradisal damsel, reassured,
Now limply let herself be wooed and won.
The sage, the soul of mellow chivalry,
Prince-like the yielding maiden lightly bore

To where a floral arch, by nature reared,
Waved pollen-dusted blooms on glossy stems
Of stalking creepers twisted into knots.
This fragrant gate invited to a bower
Whose floor was velvet, flowered was the roof
Through which the moon cast balmy beams of light.
The moon, the queen and governess of spring,
Her fairies set to dancing –twinkling shapes
Across the vaults of heav'n; their shadow'd lights
Made patterns on the grass; and shades and lights
In arabesques of ballet scintillate.
The breezes whispered, soft as maiden's dreams,
And stirred the tiny prickling of desire:
The creeper closer to her tree-lord clung
And birds, in tender, downy nests new-warm,
Found mutual love. Upon this scented scene
That thrilled with nervous beauty nature -linked
Did Night, composer of the weary limb,
Day's consummation myriad-gemmed with stars,
Her sable cloak o'er hill and forest throw
The forest stilled, the moon-lit hills embalmed—
And lightly veiled them with a silent net
Of visions. Gazing on this sorcery
Youth lay with half-closed eyes of dreamy bliss,
While Madan, naked god of lovers' nights,
Coloured his arrow points with floral flame
And with the silken cords of tendrils bright
Discharged his shafts upon the love-lit scene.
The nymph and sage lay lost in witchery.

CANTO THREE

Shakuntala's childhood

The buds of spring, love's verdant paradise,
Were warming as it veered to Cancer's line.
Spring dreamed of children burgeoning in the womb
Curled up, of blossom painting all the world,
Of hives of honey lashed by tempests late,
Of youths who dallied in libidinous bowers
Secluded. Tender songs the birds let loose
As summer, rich as orient, nearer came;
And short-lived petals fell, the pregnant styles
Now bearing tiny heads of infant forms
That leafy cradles on the breezes rocked.
Then summer came, the Croesus-king of earth,
Whose halls are hung with verdure tropic-green
That drinks the surfeit of outpouring heat.
Rich is this king, as poet's fancy rich:
Sea maids attend him, waving gauzy wings
That fan refreshment to his majesty;
His life of colour full, luxurious, gay.
Like humble beggar-ministrels bumble-bees
In humming swarms sing words of eulogy;
Birds, rainbow-glinting, or with wings as black
As wax, or shadow-spotted at his call
So welcome come and swing their joyous tails
On claw-hooked twigs, awaiting to revive
Rich raptures of a message northward borne.
Queen Verdure, daughter of the forest god,
Sings on her creeper-vine, a full-fledged maid
Arrayed in green; now pregnant of the earth
With sari-ends she hides her growing breasts,
And watches while the avian villas grow
Of leaves and mud beakborne —and smiles content !

Meanwhile in verdant bower of jasmine sweet
The happy couple passed pellucid hours
Of perfect pleasure satisfied, at ease.
Her swelling loins the fruit within attest
And breasts once maiden: teen-age modesty
Brings blushes as she stands before the king;
The fair proportion of her fairy form
Had lost midway its erstwhile symmetry
And bulged in raputre for expected birth.
The advancing year from curled infancy
Hot youth attained and mellowed in the sun;
Reaped autumn's corn-rich harvest, fruitful crops,
And smiled serene, in peace secure of want,
'Neath moon-cooled skies of blue the Orient gives.
Then came bold winter, with a straying mist
Upon the river-bank: the foreign sun,
On southward voyage to the Capricorn,
From snow-capped peaks its seas of snow-winds sucked.
And as the growing seed its dormant days
Was dreaming out, the tender-skinned thin cheeks
Of pale and anxious Menaka blushing smiled,
For now the womb released its weight, a girl,
A single cherub, cherry-blossom sweet,
A rich reward. God-sent to earth, nymph-born,
A smiling which was this, whose bloom, compound
Of heav'n and earth, the home of Nature graced.

"My year is spent", the fair nymph said; "my friends
On marble peaks await me fairy-free
As through the clouds they mount and soar and speed.
Fine, happy days have we on these fair banks
Seen rolling down to sea in sun-lit gleams;
Fine draughts of greenest summer have we breathed,
And felt the throb, the thrill, the heave of life
Quick-pulsed. But this is earth—where partings prick
Like thorns, farewells are winter to the trees;

And now on earth must mine unwatered eyes
Ooze tears that n'er before my cheeks bedewed."
The first sobs came: the heaving fairy wept,
Her touching lashes wet with silky drops;
But quick composed herself and comfort spoke:
"Except on earth immortals never shed
A tear, for all the heav'nly world is ware
That those who love do never part in soul.
And therefore, sage, permit me go: I fly
To Indra's lofty realm where, farther off,
Yet nearer thee in spirit shall I be."

Slow drooped in pensive grief the hoary beard
Of sadd'ned sage; his nerves grew taut and frayed,
Redd'ned his rheumy eyes at parting's sting,
And once and twice and thrice he shook his head
Dissuading gently— but to no avail:
She needs must go, must go and cannot stay
For lightning strikes from heav'n's rapid ire.
"This little gem, this smiling paradise,"
The sage imploring begged, "this milk-lipped babe
Breast-nestled wilt thou merciless forsake ?
Rough fingers of the father shall it suck,
Be rocked on boulder-knees, and roughly grow
Rough-handled by the child-unknowing male ?
Lone shall I leave it when to bathe I go
To river-brink, its scared eyes terror-struck
Of swooping falcon as it grim-clawed falls ?"

Menaka, as instructed by Indra, then leaves for heaven while Vishwamitra, left alone with Shakuntala, is disillusioned. D. K.

The sage in disenchantment felt abashed,
In fear, disgraced; and shamed to be alive
Unworthy, unequipped, He knit his brows:

"So thus the gods deceive," his thinking said,
And pond'ring deep there rose within his soul
A feeling hot begetting silent curse
Till he, self-conscious, checked the evil thought.
And bending low above the cherub sweet,
The little bunch of beauty in his lap,
"The little birds," he said, "shall mother thee.
Thou shalt not lack for food or drink; for Earth,
Kind Mother to the growing orphan'd child,
Shall nourish thee on Nature's dainty sweets."
In tender thought, as tenderly he brushed
His beard across the sleeping infant's brow
Which, waking, wept, and rolled her fearful eyes
That dropped with quick'ning tears,and pouted lips
Rose-red, and fluttered tiny hands in limp
Appeal as if her heart had turned to tears.
The sage across her head his loving hands,
A parent's hands, then passed, and stroked her hair
Of growing curls, and touched with soft caress
Her scalp still pliant to the touch of hands.
He lifted her and in his bosom set
And up and down he walked, and petals picked
From creeper blooms, and laid her there in bed.
The sweet days passed—and sweet their product she!
Whom lifting, northward where Malini flows
Washing the northern foothills glacier-born
He went: the river runs by rounded rocks
With silv'ry tongue, and carves meandering curves
By floral banks, by cuckoo-quickened woods
Where wrinkled rishis close their tired eyes.
A jewel in the leaves he set her down
And clucking made her smile. He paused. He looked.
He sat and brooded with a heavy heart.
Then with a last dear look has he went his way,
Bound for bleak heights of penance to the north.

Away he went, the sage Vishwamitra,

But bees there came in humming, buzzing swarms
Their queen pursuing, larger she than they
As majesty befits. A lovelier home
She sought, disdainful of her ancient hive,
And found it on a creeper's elbow-bone:
The engineers make estimates; the brisk
Field-workers seek on neighb'ring blooms the bricks
Wherewith to build a palace neat and new,
And ply their tasks so swiftly that the queen
Soon settles, guarded with the poison-points
Of soldier-subjects. Soon a city grew
Of walls partitioned into chambers full
Each one of honey: and the tube-doored cells
Were swarming where the drones the honey stored
That seekers gathered on their hook-bent legs.
So rich a prize the flowers, fertilised,
Gave them, and coloured it with pollen dust.
Some sweetened drops fell on the baby's lips:
Content and satisfied she, tasting, smiled.

The downy-breasted birds, behind the bees,
Would they be laggards serving such a child ?
On twitt'ring wings they fluttered to her side.
Some dancing trailed their coloured tails for show
And sang: "Chirrip, chirrip, chuchu, chuchu."
"Cookoor", some cooed—a lover's note: 'cookoor' !
Another called "piwu", mate calling mate.
"Cluck, cluck", a chuckler came: "peck, peck",
The long-beaked said, its own name uttered there;
"Kafal, kafal"—spring's berry-eating bird.
"Kauwa", the raven cried. "Koho, koho ?"
The koel questioned sable-liveried,
"Gop, gop", the mimic, cracker of the nut,
"Meaun, meaun" the peacock serpentine.
The home-fond swallow sang: "Chirlir, chirlir !"
And "Ding-a-ding" the cooper-smith intoned,
"Tuwhit", the round-eyed sleepy owl, "tuwhit" !

Came every bird that nestles in the woods
And danced, or sang, or down a feather cast,
Or shielding warmed her with its downy wings
From chilly movements of the woodland breeze.
A protegee of birds Shakuntala,
(for thus her name) lived smiling happily.

Upon a day the aged Kanva came.
Grey was his beard as Karish, flowing wide;
And bald his crown o'er wrinkled furrows stretch'd
Yet left a wasting tuft of scanty hair.
Still strong his eyes, a patriarchal beam
That shone shrewd lustre through the ageing lids.
An early riser he: before the cock
Broke through his dreams he wak'd, or opening day
Its first cool breath on jungle reeds exhaled,
And caught the pole-star in the self-same place:
For in his sleep to time he was alive,
And while the night still gloomed, cold, sable-grey,
And ere the feathers of a bird first stirred
To dew-wet air's cool motion, he forestalled
The dawn, tho' sleep his eye-lids thinly veiled.
Malini's leaves, unstirred, lay limply still
And low her ripples; washer-woman birds
Had not yet felt the twilight when he came
His sandals clicking. Once his prayers he said
And straight into the cold waves stoutly plunged
Shiv'ring and rubbed his limbs all numb with cold.
Cupping his palm he took four water-sips
And twined around his thumb the knotted thread
The mystic thrice. Between the finger-joints,
Eyes closed, he counted the interstices
Ten times, ten times, ten times. He struck his palms
Together like a pigeon beating wings,
And "Humphet' cried. With sandal-wood he touched
His brow. Like modest maid the twilight came
Grey-veiled, a star still bearing on her crown

And slow to southward stepping cleared the clouds
—the dingy threshold of her eastern gates—
The dawn's way making ready as it heaved
Above the breeze its golden loveliness.

This day, his prayers done, the aged sage,
As grey as scripture, smoothed his ruffled beard
And through the mystic fingers at the sun
He peered, a golden orb of majesty
Mounting the blushing snows. With flying shafts
He chased the sable demons; smilingly
He showed his power, royal, lightly held.
His car sped onwards drawn by horses seven
That pawed the orient clouds and from their hooves
They threw a dust that shook the early heavens.
Great glory shows a rising god to men,
The Lord of Day, the Universal Eye !

Eyeing the golden grandeur of the east
Eastward the sage his wandering footsteps turned:
On Truth he meditated as he walked.
Absorbed in thought, in morning light absorbed
Him soon disturbed a confused screech of wings:
A red-clawed falcon, hungry with the dawn,
Had swooped with cruel aim in needle-eyes
And caught in tyrant claws as sharp as steel
A sparrow's chick, still yellow-saffron beaked.
Wounded it screeching fell; with helpless wings
It beat the air. And sharp the murd'rer pounced
And clawed again, its wailings heeding not
The heartless tyrant. Freely flowed its blood.
The anguish'd mother watching filled the air
With piteous cries as sharp as dagger-points.

"Forbear, forbear," in horror screamed the sage,
"Thou murd'rer foul, thy blood shall burn in hell !
To kill is doubly wrong: this killing rash

Live coals of fire will heap upon thine head.
Thou tyrant, fast and die ! Repent of flesh
And find a healthy innocence so shriv'n
That nectar may'st thou taste and see thy God."
In fear the falcon let its victim fall
And sharply torn the bleeding sparrow fell,
Fell helplessly like red-streaked petal plucked.
Its blood-stained beak was open: screeches low
At intervals it uttered full of pain.
The sage's pity-quickened steps all limp
And injured found the bird: disjoint its neck,
Its half-fledged wing a pulp of flutt'ring down.
His saintly lips he pursed in sympathy
And wept in pity for its infant wounds
And smoothed its ruffled wings, his cordial tears
Diluting blood that hands of mercy stained.
He shook the dew from early blossomings
And cooled the fever of its beating heart;
Then lest his human hands should do it ill
He put the wretch inside his bark-skin pouch:
Its very lightness gave more tenderness !

A piteous cry he heard ! And turning quick
A human child he saw, with fear-filled eyes,
That wailed on feather-bed its weary wait
And lifted upwards looks solicitous
And eager, dimly, through a veil of tears
As one bright drop upon its rose-cheeks roll'd
Its round legs kicked, its hands imploring rose.

"Oho, sweet child, what dost thou in this bower ?
Once blessed of thee what heartless parents left ?
An infant nymph art thou, a fairy child,
Or rosy bastard to a shameless god ?"
He picked her up, no heavier in his arms
Than *krauncha* feathers which the northern breeze
Blows wantonly athwart the snowy slopes.

He kissed the coral lips, the snowy brow,
The chubby cheeks—those plump, round, childish cheeks !—
And chucked the tender chin, as butter soft,
And passing loving hands around its back
He closely clasped the smiling child, and smiled !
As father proud, his feet made swift with joy,
He bore the babe across the dew-damp fields
Where Gautami addressed the *tulsi* plant
That grew on ochre-coloured mound, in prayer.
His ageing wife the hand of time had stripped:
The face, once bright with maiden bloom, the bloom
Of hoary age now wore, as cold as snow,
—for life had aged her quicker than her spouse—
And grave and white she was, a haggard crone.
"O grey-haired beauty painted by the years,
My dearest scarecrow like the hog-plum blown,
My winter Ganges with its wrinkled sands,
My wife, my Gautami ! Has any god
Upon thee played some trick that thou must bear
These chubby cherry-coloured cherubim ?"
From out the eyes the twinkling humour smiled
Of jester Kanva, as he pulled his beard
And sat himself on durdabal, cross-legged.
But rapt in thought he startled Gautami
Who, evil apprehending, dropped the leaf,
The *sal*-leaf with its bamboo splinters stitched
Which nature's cup provides for holy rites.
For she had heard how Parshuram, behight
By ireful sire, in due obedience struck
And killed his mother with his dreaded axe
For harbouring unchaste thoughts in lonely hours.

Yet as she turned no evil was in sight,
But just a golden bloom on aged tree
So sweetly nestling in the shelt'ring warmth
As on the air a fragrance to exhale !
She matched his mood in understanding quick !

"Goest thou, old mischief-monger, paragon
Of paradise, a-wooing in the woods?
With youthful mischief twinkle thine old eyes !
Deceive me not: but tell how long thou hast
Been twining creepers of the fairest bloom
Upon thine ageing boughs ! And why hast thou
Brought home to me this bastard child of love ?"
Her mood turned swift to joy: "No bastard this,
Thou lotus-bud of sweetness, but a gift
Of fairies given to my ageing bones,
A lovely toy ! Oh come, come quick to me,
Thou darling—oh those cheeks, those speaking eyes !—
As light as feather art thou in my arms."
She took the child and played, and played
While Kanva, twinkling, for an hour gazed.

Then distant dames and curious maidens came
Inquiring; and with joy they clapped their hands:
"A fairy hast thou found"—unknowing wise !
Some chucked the tiny chin, some touched her cheeks
And some passed loving hands across her brow;
The red lips others kissed or, chuckling, played
Or clicked 'gainst palm the amusing finger game.
But all declared she was a blessed gift.
To smiles with smiles replied proud Gautami
But little spoke, as fits a mother's pride,
Old mother newly born, her breast astir.

Six woodland years then passing swiftly-winged
From infancy to age their circles wheeled
Once, twice and thrice. The child to maiden grew,
Wild rose now garden-reared. Her figure filled,
Her lips to sweetness softened, and her tongue
A language spoke from creatures learnt and birds
That carry blooms aloft with warbling cries.
She lipsed her dawning words of woodnotes wild
From nature's store of utt'rance, consciously,

And quickly grew to girlhood, slender form
As sculptured goddess slim. The harp of life
She learnt to play in all its varied moods,
Her story-loving mind, of curious cast,
Luxuriating in experience
That came from nature, influence sweet and mild.
With friends she danced like faun by mountain-spring
And drank the murmur of the running brook
And sang like bird in woods at liberty.

CANTO FOUR

Dushyanta's Hunt

Dushyanta, of the lunar line of kings,
The brightest jewel that the great gods graced,
Man-lion, noble-featured lord of lords
Felt weary, sighing, in his hall of state.
Tho' noblest shepherd of his people, proud
Of learning's triumphs as of burnished sword's,
As young and daring still he loved the woods
That yielded chase and scope for archer's skill.

To him a poet sang: "O mighty lord,
Next to the lord of paradise enthroned
Upon the proudest hearts of myriad men,
Thou art the sun resplendent on the peak
Of glorious Bharat in its golden age.
Thou rid'st a gleaming chariot, drawn by steeds
As glorious as the beasts that grace the sun,
And shap'st all things to order and to form.
Thy blazing arrows fall on lowly things
Of grey mortality that bleed and die
Incinerated to an ashen heap.
For thee the flashing firmament unfolds
Its paradisal splendour, songsters wing
Their airy way, breasting the silv'ry clouds;
For thee do subjects open lotus—eyes
Of beaming loyalty, and warble warm
Sweet—throated praises multitudinous."

Half-hearing he, the weary prince, the words
Of high-flown eulogy,and sighing, knit
His brows and yawned at men so wearisome,
And yet the poet, for the chink of gold,

Went on and on : "O thou a mountain art
On earth secure thy feet, thy head in heav'n.
Thy breast is full of glory, op'ning rich
Like blossom, thou who shelt'rest men !
Of conscience pure as snow, thou givest yet
An endless cataract of charity.
State cares becloud thee but they cannot dim
Thy glory bright, for rich remains thy store
As leaves in forest, coffers numberless".

"Five hundred coins of sterling gold," the king
In boredom ordered—and the Treasurer ran.
Then turning to his Premier he spoke:
"Harness my steeds of mettle, bring my bow."
Rubbing obsequious hands of fawning art
The chief departed on his hast'ning legs,
...And once again the tired monarch yawned.

Fast were the men arrayed in order bright,
Their lances glinting in the beaming sun.
Fast was the chariot brought and graced
With garlands all by palace craftsmen made.
And crested, mettlesome horses pawed the ground
And champed the clicking bits: their croups
Beneath the harness shone. But slow the king
Came, closely eyeing all —and half the men
Dismissed: "For hunting, not for war we go
And fast and far shall fare," he sharply warned.
Trumpets flourish, drums reverberate
—the noise is riotous: the banners wave,
Lift lances gleaming, and the chantings loud
Of red-capped pandits from the Vedas sing
Glory to great Dushyanta: "May the king
Of beasts, whose eyes the jungle dominate,
Whose claws are steel and thunderous his voice,
Fall low and kiss thy footsteps conquering."

The grand procession started, dust in clouds
Followed like a wake; two lancers led
The royal car, their lances brandishing.
Behind the car there rode the bodyguard
And crowds of hunters with shikari dogs
Scenting the air on leash; the beaters last
Held high their sticks, a shouting multitude.
On even roads fast rolled the chariot wheels,
The rims so quickly whirling that the spokes
Into a blur resolved that was not seen
So many passed so fast. The horses' manes
Streamed, flattened by the wind their passing made,
And hoofs steel-shod rang sharp and struck-out sparks.
The reins ran free, the snaffles loose, the steeds
Sped mettlesome like lightning on its course,
And as they rounded corners in a curve
At slightest curb the graceful chariot lurched
Till, shaken from his dreams, the weary king
Its side tight grasped and watched the garlands there
Torn one by one by straining breeze away.
By fields of waving green now shoulder-high
Of bristling wheat and mustard-gold they sped,
And wide-eyed shepherds, crook beneath the arm,
With lifted hand from dazzle shaded eyes.

Some distance covered, looking back the king
Commanded half the men should home return
And with some chosen experts he advanced
Towards the forest foothills seeking game.
O'er rugged ground the chariot thundered on
With iron-chatt'ring wheels and lurching sides
Till mother birds recalled their wandering young
Wheeling above the nests, and timidly
The *chataks* eyed the heavens from the eaves
As roaring through the woods rolled rushing wheels.
"More speed", the king commanded; and with whips
They lashed the horses, which with muscles strained

And lengthened stride cut distance, gallopping
Till flanks perspired and vap'rous beads of sweat
Passed into mist and cooled the steaming skin.
The heavy-harnessed riders fell behind,
Outspeeded by the light and thund'rous car,
And as they turned a corner lagged in doubt
And stopped confused: the king was lost to sight !

In glade remote a tiny, glossy fawn
Slimb-limbed and sleek the tender blades selects
Of juicy grass from out the herbage coarse
That grew on jungle-fringe luxuriant:
A little bunch he culls with tasteful tongue
Crunching between his teeth its sweet'ned sap
That sugars all his mouth and twists his snout
In languid pleasure thus at ease to browse
A jungle child in freedom innocent.
Then thunder rolls and up he startled looks
To see what god thus rumbling denotes:
The race-sense pricks his ears, his eyes roll large
And scenting danger yet unknown he stands
Alert on slender legs of fleeting speed.
The chariot soon he spies, and for a space
Regards with innocence of curious eyes,
Pausing in slow incertitude to ask
If there be bloody danger on those wheels.
Then as the royal archer takes his bow
And ready shaft quick from the quiver fits
And takes prompt aim with vision keen and sharp,
The native sense upstarts—than wisdom learnt
Far richer—flight advising, flight for life
Well-loved of all. On wiry legs he leaps,
Ripples his back for speed and kicks his feet.
To peering king a bounding heap he seems
Of flying flesh far distant: twisting neck
To steal a backward look, his rump half-drawn
And arched to forelegs so he shrinked in dread

Lest arrow sharp his flank should penetrate.
For one brief glance he eyes the gaudy car
Advancing. Then again the bounding starts;
His feet scarce touch the earth; like lightning's flash
—flash following flash—he leaps more in the air
Than oft he touches solid earth beneath.
A bunch of tender grass half-chewed bestrews
His bounding path, in driblets falling slow,
And nought he recks of thorn or flint or briar
As panting hard for dearest life he flees.

The whips cracked loud, and faster rolled the wheels
As steeds at stretch of fullest gallop sped:
With ev'ry leap the fawn yet gained in space
By half a pole, the horses lagged the same,
And soon, half lost to royal sight, he neared
The shelt'ring woods, from death now half secure.

Thereon two figures, interposing, spoke:
"O mighty king, forbear; the barb replace.
As breathless speeds the hermit's holy beast,
A glossy innocence by Kanva fed
With loving hands within his sacred bower,
Him injure not, our little brother fawn !
But come in peace to peaceful hermitage
And print it purer with they royal feet
And rest awhile thy hunter's weary limbs,
Thou Brahmins' lord, protector of the cow.
Though Kanva now is on his pilgrimage
To Soma-Nath, the sacred southern shrine,
The Ashram maids will thee receive with joy
And thou, a sun to men, on humble huts
Shalt pour this lucky day thy kindly rays."
The king replaced his shaft and pushed his bow
Aside; and looking grave he paused and thought
Awhile and said, "Though calls of state are great,
This pleasant green the eyes of weary kings

Relish. There is no finer colour known
Than when in spring the emerald buds appear.
Our playful youth green glorifies and Spring,
When nature's wealth renascent vivifies.
Green light provides no strain but calms the mind
And toiling bodies fresh invigorates.
The liv'ried spring, by Vanaspati graced,
Wears green as choicest colour for its dress
No better seen than in this vernal bower !
From fretful fever of cares politic
A king his respite seeks in leafy worlds
And just the green to breathe he creatures hunts.
But now non-violent', here smiled the king,
"I come a pilgrim to your nunnery
And thank the fawn that invitation gave
In absence of the sage. Fain would I walk
Through woodlands scent-exhaling, dreaming slow
In leisured luxury where Malini
Whispers its mellifluous murmurings
Beneath the overhangs of blossom'd trees.
For wall-eyed cities, buzzing like a hive,
Both blunt and dull man's sensitivity
And busy haunts are violent with strife
That only woodland reverie pacifies."

Thus spoke the king, the overlord of kings,
And doffed his crown and stately robe and stepped
To earth's own carpet, spring's green silky blades.
The very birds rejoiced: on flutt'ring wings
They came windborne from mansions overseas
And sang their welcome bringing leafy fronds.
The very blossoms clapped and bouquets shower'd
Of airy pollen-drizzle saffron-tinged,
And coyest flowers, in their vernal bloom
Half-veiled, slow lifted starry eyes and beamed.

The king went with the maids along the moss

O'er which dew-clustered ripples played and purled.
A bubbling melody ran Malini
By borders flower-filled, rejoicing. Clanged
The smith-bird's anvil, and long peacock-tails
Of Saraswati's *vahan* down the branch
Displayed their hues like slanting rainbow-fans.
Green nutcrackers graced the trees, from leaves
To be distinguished scarce; the fly-catchers
Showed white upon the breeze; and swallows skimmed
Low-flying as befits such humble wings.
"Who comes ?" the cuckoo asked in depths concealed.
The owl, that night laments, his welcome sang
In daylight full —and all the birds rejoiced !
Bees too buzzed welcome, and e'en fairy-flowers
Dipped smiling homage, multicoloured scarves
Unfurling; while the creepers swung festoons
That sent the shadows flickering down the trees
Where emerald buds unwound their curl'd globes.
The air, cool-moving, blew with fragrance fill'd.

There widen'd vistas here or narrowed there,
The scenery changing as the king advanced,
But all the forest richly-dight received
The royal wanderer in pleas'd surprise.
The little pools, where floated leaves the gifts
Of springtime showers, smiled; and cooling winds
Breathed balm, as revelling in the solitude
He wandered, all admiring, through the bush
Where—homely sight !—washed garments hung, of bark
Hand-cut, wood-hammered, glossy, soft—and dripped;
He felt a throb of pleasure, amorous throb
On right-hand temple —sign of luck in love !

But Madhavya, his one companion left,
The court fool he, who cracked his licens'd jokes
As gentleman in stiff-ruled court at large;
With ball and staff he stole the weary hours

For great Dushyanta by his harmless jests
Of candid humour -and he was his friend !
Now tottered over-acting: pouting lips
And rolling eyes and nodding head awry
And raising thorn-pricked finger: "Mighty king,"
He said, "What empty whim, what wild goose-chase
Drives thee thou tyrant on this lengthy march ?
Have mercy, turn ! The poison'd needle pricked,
Of jungle thorn, this artery; and blood
Streams pulsing out my life and blackly clots
Like serpent-sting on deaden'd flesh corrupt.
I bleed ! I burn !! I die !!! I go. Turn home
Thy steps, my master, and on restful wheels
Bear me away or else I fainting sink
A wounded Brahmin on the jungle grass."
The king said, "Fool"; the jester said, "Fool not.
I am no fool to be befooled by fools.
By all the trinkets of the mundane world
I swear: I die on thorny deathbed laid.
Change these for sheeps' bells if it is not true
That Death the tiger with its flaming eyes
Comes padding through this jungle dark apace
To make a dainty meal of Madhavya !"
"Get on," with flashing eyes the king commands;
The jester's tott'ring knees declare, "I can't,
For I am weak from bleeding and my guts
Are hunger-hollowed like an empty gourd.
Sarangi-like my empty belly groans
And famished entrails dance the *tandav* dance.
Throat-parching famine dries and chokes my voice.
I curse this sage who lives on jungle roots;
And dainty sweetmeats, sugared visions rise
Before my starving eyes to tantalise.
While ladies weep in sumptuous marble halls
A beggar thou devourest berries wild
Of jungle bitterness on beds of thorns:
To beds of scented roses now return !"

"Hush, fool," the king commanded. For not far
Behind a rose-bush sounded voices sweet,
And standing-tip-toe, through the screen of leaves
He peered and peeped. Propitious moment this !:
For woodland lovelies graced a garden-plot,
Unpainted belles of artless-seeming charm
Of art more full than art can ever teach.
"Who then are these ?——the daughters of the clouds ?"
He mused, "then why do jet-black tresses flow
In graceful silky lengths ? Why dark the eyes
That fawns would envy ? What a picture here
For artist's brush, as on the chisell'd curves
Of inclined hips they carry water-pots
And move to slake the thirsty buds of spring !".

"Shakuntala", a voice called, silver-tongued.
Upon the call a fair nymph turned —a fair
Nay, fairest say, half-earth, half-heav'n born!—
And turning rose as graceful as a Queen
Of May who rules the springtime revelry.
"Oh fair Shakuntala, how fair thy youth,
Thy tender youth, thy graceful bloom appears
There by the *kesar* tree ! The tree's own bride
Thou look'st, a jasmine tree by moonlight lit,
With jasmine scented; and he beck'ning seems
With yellow fingers calling to his side
His *sirish*—tressed wife ——bright union !"
And shaking jet-black hair the dulcet-voiced
Priyamvada, the speaker, waits and smiles.
The nymph replied: "As sweet the name thou hast
As are thy words, thou teller of sweet tales,
Priyamvada ! Teach me that sweetness, for
I can't, as thou, such honeyed words invent."

Behind his wild-rose screen the king concealed
Said to himself : "Thou dost thyself great wrong;
No nightingale in woods by moonlight lit

E'er warbles sweeter notes than these thy words
That cast so fine a spell." But suddenly
Shakuntala espied a dying shrub
Whose newly-budded blooms were dropping, dried
By some fell blight. As when in mansion rich
A child, whose smile at rising fever fades,
Is nursed unconscious, unaware of care,
By red-eyed, weeping mother at its bed
Who smooths for fevered brow the pillow hard,
So she, Shakuntala, bemoan'd the flower:
"Sweet child, so low why droopest thou, our tears
Unheeding ? Now revive, O shrub, revive
And smile at last upon thy cradle rocked.
This water drink and cool thy fev'rish heat
And shoot and bud and dance and feel the spring."
With these soft words the anxious maiden poured
The limpid liquid on the roots, afraid
To give too much, too little not content;
Like quicksilver it sank and ran around
The roots, sucked greedily by blacken'd soil.
"Thus bending low," a second maid remarked;
Thou lookest like the daughter of the sea
Sprinkling the garden of Vanaspati."
The king agreed; "yet fairer far !" he mused.

There came a bee on buzzing wings, a thief
On mischief bent, whose horrid eyes and head
Strike terror into maiden hearts. His wings
With dreadful droning round Shakuntala's ears
Hover'd, as if he thought her cheeks a flower,
And trembled round her tresses, terrifying.
Turning she tossed her head in nervousness;
Yet still he came, importunately loud
With drones and touching once her cheek brought tears.
Priyamvada, who speaks so sweet, her friend
In nervous flutter seeing lightly said:
" On king Dushyanta call, of chivalry

The prince, whose lordly might black demons drives
From hermit's groves: for beauty in distress
"'Tis sure he quickly would evict a bee !"
"'Tis sure indeed," the king concealed agreed;
"I will not hide when such a lovely form
Is thus annoyed by buzzing devil black:
My duty now I shall perform and drive
The mischief-monger from her nervous face."
He musing thus from his concealment stepped,
All loth his golden opportunity
To miss of playing thus the gallant Knight.
Then with surprise the maidens saw arrive
A figure tall; majestic was its form,
And proud its brows, its dress illustrious
—A very hero seeming ! As he came,
Inquiring where the rishi Kanva was,
The bumble-bee in trepidation flew
And left the maiden's face now blushing red.

Priyamvada remarked his dignity
And amiably invited him to rest:
"Such grace thou giv'st this garden, from afar
Arriving, stranger: nought but jungle weeds
Do we have here and neighbours have we none
But jungle hinds and creatures beggarly.
We seldom see distinguished city-men !
In solitude we tell each other tales
In humble language —tales of mighty kings
And noble knights, but few in flesh we see !
Our father Kanva is on pilgrimage
Southward to Soma Nath the sacred shrine;
And we, unschooled and wild, have yet to learn
Visitors illustrious how to entertain.
Would'st thou then deign this humble seat to take
Of *kusha*-grass, though rude and rough it be,
Unconscious of the sitter's dignity."
Words shrewdly sweet !—and these the king admired,

He then declared he was a messenger
By great Dushyanta sent to see the state
Of sylvan seats of holy sacrifice,
And simple maids with prim, veil'd eyes admired
His noble bearing, noble looks and words.
"I have no scorn of lowly *kusha*-grass
When such hands proffer it, but now I fain
Would stand and gaze at all these lovely flowers
Which, reared in holy *ashram*, nursed by hands
So tender, double fascination give.
Stands there a 'champak' ? Bloom of female grace
How shy she looks, how simply beautiful!
All ignorant I am yet yearn to know
The name unknown, for surely is my heart
Bewitched by beauty such..........." "Shakuntala,"
Thus interrupted in her innocence
Anasooya who thought his eyes on maid
Not bloom were fastened (and perhaps they were !).
Priyamvada, with mild reproach in eyes
Rebukes the interruption and corrects;
"'Tis Kunja Kaumudi the name thou seek'st,
The Moonlight of the Grove, a lovely flower."
"Shakuntala or Kunja Kaumudi
Are both as sweet to me as moonlight's self,"
Replied the king admiring. At his words
Shakuntala cast down her eyes and blushed
As blushes red a damask rose in June.

To hide confusion, low the shy maid bent
Directing water to a flower's roots
Which waved its leaves, as lively child its hands
Raised to its nurse, when low-toned breezes lift.
The drink, that wetted half the leaves, a gloss
Imparted to the green that shone as bright
As lover's eyes that look their gratitude.

Of presence male now conscious she, as maid

So conscious ever is, could not forbear
Her side-long glances, shy and hesitant,
That lift the coyness of her lashes low.
His fine attire well-cut and neat of cloth
Of texture uniform his noble limbs
Sets off: how could a simple maid restrain
Admiring looks ? But eyes soon meet with eyes,
So eager his upon her form to dwell
That bashful of the gaze and flinching slight,
As maiden should, she bent to dig the roots
And thus from cheeks allow the blush to drain.
The sight of tender loveliness such toil
Performing —skin with perspiration wet—
Oppressed the king who Priyamvada so
Addressed: "Have you no mercy in your heart
To sweep the earth with lotus petals thus ?
You slave a loveliness that slaves the world !
See how she wrinkles dripping brows distressed.
Give her her turn to sit from labour free
And this gold ring is yours." And with the words
He drew the ring and placed it in her hand.
Anasooya, so keen and shrewd of sight,
Upon the seal 'Dushyanta' written saw
And, pert as always, what this meant enquired;
The king, abashed a moment, then replied:
"I am Dushyanta's agent and this ring
Bears his great name and his majestic seal."

This answer satisfied the simple girl
Who went with other friends to join the maid
Shakuntala, still toil pretending, still
To turn refusing. "Rest, my dear, thy limbs
Thy weary limbs," some said in mockery;
And one in malice plucked her blouse and joked:
"The spring has filled thee: firm thy bosom swells
And presses tight the bark too scanty here !"
But all cajoled her begging her to turn

And greet the guest: "Some words of welcome say,
Sweet-scented words to him who pleasure brings."
"This is Shakuntala," they chorused all
As she obeyed. And thus they met, these two,
The shy Shakuntala, the grateful king.

Priyamvada, presenting her, did add:
"Sixteen her summers; but she brings the spring
In wintry days ! And beauteous as a bower
We think —blush not, my dear, I speak the truth."
Saucy Anasooya could not forbear
To add: "And sweet and ripe for marriage-bed
For bridgroom meet—or else the God of Love,
Cupid himself,—will her to temple take."
Thereon the angry maiden blushing flashed
A scolding look upon her cheeky friend
And simple in her dignity, her bloom
Enhanced by anger, in rebuke replied:
"Unfit those words which maidenhood profane,
Thou speakest wanton. Mother Gautami
Shall hear of this your shameless talk and judge
Your misbehaviour." Half in anger real
Half feigned, amid their smiles, she started off
On errand self-imposed, across the grass.
But something pulled her up, a gentle pull,
A flutter in her heart invisible,
To steal a look, to cast a glance, to turn;
So she pretended to have run a thorn
Into her naked sole, and, dropping, called
Priyamvada to come and pull it out.
She called her *friend* but at the *king* she looked.
And he rushed forward, bustling fussily,
And offered aid and humble sympathy
But she in silence dropped her modest eyes.

Thereon a multitude of voices rang
First dim, then loud and louder, from the brake

Of men who sought the king with search and shout.
The slight deceit he practised with the ring
Rose to his mind: he feared to be unmask'd
And leave he begged in haste to go and see
The messengers on royal errand come.
He hurried off and left them wondering.

CANTO FIVE

Shakuntala pines

The king his men sent home. His pleasure lay,
He said, in wand'ring through the woods—in spring
A luxury—when boughs with blossoms thick
By breezes swayed their scented showers dropp'd
In cool and shady glades, beguiling care.
From busy haunts, from cries of war released
His soul luxuriates in greenery
And feels its kinship with all natural things.
The very smoke of sacrifice in curves
Uprising peace reveals the very birds
Send messages of peace as, catching words
Of prayer, they imitate the vedic hymns
And holy chants repeat when spice and flower
In flames of incense consecrated rise.
Spring woods are mansions hung with emerald,
Tree-trunks their dew-gemmed pillars, round which winds
Bring coolth and sway the tasselled tapestries
Of boughs and leaves that dancing shadows cast
On woodland floors, as velvet carpetted,
And colour them, a gay kaleidoscope.
Gazelles there beam their beauteous speaking eyes.
There faires dance in silk arrayed, and grace
The glades in flaming colours shimmering;
And winged songsters fill the lulling air,
And ripple—rounded pebbles murmuring send
Through woods their wat'ry tintinnabula.

The entourage turned homeward. Madhavya
In sadness watched with twisted features strained:
"To jungle cock, to call a jungle hen,
Thou twittering dotard dost thou have to turn ?

She cuckolds thee, that cuckoo ! What a sacrifice:
All, all forsaken—palace, riches —all
Sharp thorns to court ! A winter cricket thou
Than ass no wiser, brain-turned idiot !
These bitter words as laurels thou hast earned.
Then coo, cry lovey-dovey, amorous fool !
If specious baubles needs thou must pursue
At least be wise and see them as they are.
Thy jungle hind has wet and slobb'ry lips,
Sure sign to all of soul libidinous:
Lip-licking loves unlucky are, ill-starred.
Snakes have no wetter wives that coil and wind !
From out her eyes gleams mischief: girls that smile
Not with their teeth-pearled lips but with their brows
Are shrewish mischief-mongers full of tricks.
Avoid this snare of gaudy-coloured flesh !
Like wily wanton she her lashes droops,
Her thoughts conceals. Her chin is butterine
Whose softness marks a fickle character.
Her tresses black are like a bumble-bee's
Voluptuous wings, her eyes like bat's eyes peer.
Her form, I grant, is slender— like a mantis thin !
Low-toned her voice is— as deceivers speak !
Your raiment she admires—but loves she you ?
'Tis fever, prince. Thy palace maids are fair,
Far fairer, man, than this sour tamarind.
They make thy halls a paradise on earth:
As rustling silks flit through thy corridors
Their slinky eyes, their pencilled browns that beam
The mischief forth of witching temptresses,
These do attract, these do true pleasure bring
Like heav'n-sent enchantresses of men.
When playing Cupid's game they coo like doves;
They dress to charm, they pencil arching brows
To Cupid-bows: his darts with shrewd discharge
From heart to heart they fire in dalliance.
The chubby charms of dimpling cheeks they paint

And powder. Looks belie dissembling 'Nays'
When 'Yes' they mean, and easy-flowing tears
From harsh rebukes claim pity. Through they halls
They beam and smile and weep and tales of love
Narrate, with flowr'y bunches garlanding
Thy chambers—airy forms ethereal.
Compare these hayseed beauties, jungle blooms:
What tricks have they of winsome loveliness?
Do they lift pencilled brows or steal a glance
Sideways or pose alluring curves ? Do they
Ambiguous words of double meaning speak,
One for the list'ning world, the other meant
In marriage to unite two loving minds ?
Such country belles of art all ignorant
The wise deceive not but they fool the fool.
So wiser be: in flight precipitate
Now turn and run. Do not like me be "Fool"-ed !
Thy fool has eyes and they befool his tongue:
He sees in garlands snakes, in roses blood.
World-creator Brahma, four-faced god,
Unfolder of the Vedas, scratched, they say,
One day his head, with problem hard beset:
How make the wisest biped ? For material
He took a cake of cow-dung and a face thereon
He stamped whose nose he elongated drew,
Sank pits for eyes, and all the features deck'd
With whiskers of the sword-leafed maize. He clad
In foxglove flowers this figure ludicrous
And crowned its head with poppies, gave it tongue
As rough as cow's, and thus he sent it forth:
"Go, wise one, to the earth and fool the wise."
Thou art that figure: in the mirror look
And see the horns that sprout upon thy head."

The king just smiled in amorous fancy lost:
"She is a drop of sweetest honeydew
On blushing petals that the spring doth scent;

Half-open bloom, her loveliness unripe
Still swelling with the pulse of youthful blood,
Of heav'n and earth, of flesh and soul compound,
She is an Apsara, a flower-maid
As lovely as the moon, a paragon
Who shines as bright as Usha on the snows.
Her eyes are lakes at twilight love-illumed;
Her body is a sculpture cast in gold
Wherein, as in a temple, incense burns
Exhaling perfume, and it spreads a light
For hermit hearts in sacred caves confined
That conjures rainbows to their imagings.
She is a lyric poem, spellbinding
With charms that bind by their simplicity;
A kingdom meet to conquer and to rule,
A world to live in and a heaven to hold,
A gem of purest water, flawless cut,
A fairy palace............" Now of words bereft
The king stopp'd, sighing low, disconsolate.
His love-sick master eyeing, Madhavya
Was lost a space in open-eyed surprise
And then to soothe his fever'd babblings
Of lover's tales began a narrative.

Just then there came two hermits to the king
Deputed by the forest residents,
Petitioning him stay and keep away
Black, airy demons that on wings obscene
Disturbed the penance of the holy woods.
The king, delighted by a motive giv'n,
With eagerness accepted: "Holy men
Twice-born who wear the sacred thread, with zest
My services I offer readily.
Such is my sacred duty. Kshatriyas,
The scriptures say, whose birth the gods attend,
The heav'n-born Brahmin sandal-graced protect.
We soldiers fight that holy men may dream

And those that god are seeking should not fall
A prey to mockers of our faith divine.
Here shall I linger like a slave devout
To gloomy hell consigning wicked souls
Whom Yama sable-robed then punishes.
'Tis he who sends bold-fisted warriors
To doom the foe of kine or Brahmin priest
And him deprive of paradisal bliss."

"The gods presiding over seas and lakes,
The gods that rule the mountains and the woods,
Controllers of the airs, of skies the kings,
Star-gods, and those that sway man's destinies
Bless thee, bless thee, bless thee thou mighty king !
May bliss domestic be thy lot and wealth;
May kine well-fed by Indra-gifted grass
Profusely yield thee milk, as nectar rich;
May bright thy blade flash fire on enemies
And heav'n reign in thy dominions.
In marts of commerce may with equipoise
Thy scales rich treasures weigh; and lowly men
Bend to their humble tasks obediently.
May god himself with Lakshmi bless thy house
And there be resident to eternity."
So chanting slow the hermits left the king.

And as they left he stood and heaved a sigh:
"Thy wishes granted, heart's desire fulfilled,
These saints suggested this should be my lot."
Full long he mused, full oft he sighed. The days,
Full many days, of plodding dullness passed
When slow the sun his heavenly courses ran
And heavy hours drew their laggard lengths,
For beauty in her bower lay concealed
And dream'd of other things than wounded hearts
Unconscious of the hurt her love inspired.

One day that gentleman-at-large of courts
Madhavya, bent on care-beguiling jests
To please the lover's mind with gloom o'ercast,
Hit on a stratagem of ribaldry.
Chewing some maize, he rolled upon the ground
As if in pain and bellowed stridently
His hands upon his heart, "I burn and bleed,
Ye gods of earth and heav'n, I fall on thorns.
To me the moonlight hotter burns than sands
Saharan, flowers' scent than summer suns,
Flowers' colours than the fiery flames;
And spring is sadder than the *chatak's* eyes.
The sight of roses sharply penetrates
My temples, wrings my heart and brings me death
The death I welcome ! Kill me, death, O kill."
Afar the king these lamentations heard
And hurrying up he asked, "What ails thee, ass ?."
The answer came, "A lass, alas !, a lass."
"So thou art lover turned ? Where lives the maid ?"
"In cottage neat she bound me by her spells."
"Is she so sweet ?", the king in sympathy
Inquired. "As sweet to thee Shakuntala !
Black eyes she has, and blooms inside her grow;
As wanton warm and chubby are her cheeks;
Of finest metal is she fabricate.
Touched by the licking flames of burning love
She blushes red, as high on gold-capp'd throne
She sits and suitors circumambient
Reviews. For taste most dainty is she fit.
These fires I feel deep in my inmost self
And as my eyes rest on her kindliness
Through me a feast of blessings permeates."

The king for friend was all solicitous:
"Her name, come, tell her name mellifluous."
"'Black Potty' is her name," his fool replied
To weep pretending. For a space the king

Was silent, when he got the point he laughed,
He held his sides with helpless merriment.
For frying maize there is a clay-made pot
Of finest reddish earth, black-pigmented
And soot-begrimed: on yellow balls enthroned
It sits of cow-dung glowing in the flames
And frying maize-stalks fill its abdomen.
"Black Potty" is a lover meet for men
Who crouch in hunger round a cooking fire !
In such conceits the king took much delight
Which for a space his lover's cares beguiled
As through the woods by fool accompanied
He walked. But soon returned despondency.

"Hast thou not seen," he asked the creeper-bloom,
Sirish-tressed, with lashes dropping low,
"A slender fairy graced in woodland bark ?
Her lovely lips have rose-red pencillings
Upon their fleshly curves; her black-arch'd brows
A Cupid's bow resembles as he twangs
His flame-tipp'd shaft; her lustrous eyes are shy
Through lower'd lids to peer, and touch'd with rose,
As clouds at early dawn are colour'd,
Her cheeks like lotus are incarnadin'd.
Her chin has chiselled charm. Half-budding breasts
Their bark-skin shelter shyly heaving swell;
Around her waist a line of snow gold-tipp'd
Marks where the blouse from sari is estrang'd
That veils this fair Rambhoru's nether limbs.
A modest maid she is who speechless speaks
Love's language and in virgin innocence
Yet dreams of love, of love's dart ignorant.
Mens' hearts to steal prepared, all unaware
She seems that theft it is, and taciturn
She robs. Compact she is of nature's gifts:
Her fore-head moonlit snow, her eyes the night,
Her teeth of lustrous pearls, lips coralline,

A flower for heart, for fingers kesar shoots
And mango-fruits for breasts. A conch-shell gave
That neck its whiteness, marble made her hands,
Her voice a blackbird, hills her dignity,
The dawn lent blushes, waves her lissomness,
Of nature's self a fair epitome !
Has she upon thy petals bent those eyes
Of youthful fawn first conscious of the spring ?
Has she thy flowers touch'd as though her hands
The proper elements to fondle sought ?
O creeper, tell her if thy way she comes,
A lover's weeping heart thy blooms bedew'd."

Thus went the king along, addressing flow'rs
And birds and beauties of the forest green,
Pining for what his soul admiring sought.
Growing restless, through the woods he went
By Malinin—that name mellifluous !—
The running gardener who irrigates
The woods, and silts and softens yielding soil.
The river's green-fring'd banks were edged with pearls,
The meadows full of flowers rainbow-ting'd.
The stream as with a silver chisel carved
Its thin meanders, singing lullabies
To river-nymphs who, rocked by breezes cool,
Sat sunning idly lost in noon-day dreams.
For now the sun was at its zenith high,
A globe of heated flame, and cast its rays
To warm the curled shoots now lengthening.
The sheltering bird with plumage beautified
Lifted with eager beak and fluttering wings
A pendant twig, but as the breeze began,
The breath of noon, to blow, it let it drop
And, moved by flowing coolness, stirred the leaves
And blooms that round its nest in bunches hung
Till scent that fell from leafy filaments
Vied with the flowers and perfume skyward sent

Like burning incense. Swinging spiral flights
The swallow grazed the flowers near the ground
For, shrewd of scent, the airs salubrious
On hill-top high he tasted had, and swift
Had fled to where the golden gillyflowers
Their graceful petals dropped on mossy banks,
On lichen'd boulders, where the ripples chaste
Lapped and kissed in soft succession.
Gazelles with ample eyes of beauteous beam,
Sleek-coated, slept within their bowers
And dreamed of noon-day drink, yet loath to stir.
By foliage screen'd the twittering bird-mates played
And kisses gave in springtime dalliance.
First stirred the blades of grass: as if of way
Uncertain veered the first breeze tentative
To southwards, cooler friends encountering.
For this the time was then the morning sun
Recalls with joy his ev'ning friends day-veil'd
And on the table of his graded hours
He turns his eastern course to keep with them
His fixed appointment. This, then, was the time
When silence 'gan to stir as if aroused
By languid bells that ring on world asleep.
Such was the time when great Dushyanta marched
Up to the river's brink through boscages
And creeper-tangles trailing lengths of vine,
Round writhing trunks and thorny eglantine.
From time to time he stooped to mark the print
Of maiden feet upon the dew-brushed grass,
For even slightest sign of those we love
Delights the lover's heart impoverished.

Malini's playful splashings tinkled loud
Against the mossy banks. Not far ahead
The king a fleeting glimpse of beauty caught:
Within a gay-deck'd bower lay a maid !
The roses wild, with jealous thorns array'd,

This gracious grotto guarded: wreathed limbs
Of trees white-blossom'd in unbroken line
An outwork made, a daunting battlement
That downward curved in flowery cascades;
The clinging creepers' curling tendrils, coiled
For surer grasp, an easy entrance barr'd;
And giant trees proud-branching watch-towers form'd
To guard the prostrate sleeper 'neath the boughs.
But pressing by a thick-set jasmine bush
Whose golden armour some slight weakness show'd
The king his ingress forc'd and feasted eyes
On her whom long he sought—Shakuntala.
She lay with head on snow-white arm asleep,
Dreaming of distant things as yet to come.
Back streamed her raven tresses, and her limbs
Lay all relaxing in their languidness,
A lovely picture such as lovers dream.
Her friends were picking flowers: playfully
One wreathed a bamboo splinter flexible
With jasmine, bending it with curvature
Of graceful arch. Delighted with her work
She stood admiring; then on sleeping friend
As fell her glance, she archly smiled and ran
And graced her head with golden halo bright
Around her temples like a fairy crown.
The dreamer fair the gift unstirring wore
But smiled of ornament her consciousness.

Priyamvada, with apron full of flowers,
Looked at the dreaming beauty and she smiled
To think how she, the simple maid she was,
Dreamed of Dushyanta pining silently,
Nor would she tell her dearest friend what ailed
Her heart distressed. To charm she did not know
Or play the woman to the man she loved.
Compassion-prompted then, Priyamvada
Approached her sleeping friend deep lost in dreams

And waking asked her, "Sweet Shankuntala,
Wilt thou not hearken to thy dearest friends ?
Be frank with us and tell in simple words
What ails thy spirit in this lovely world.
Hast thou at heart a gnawing bitterness ?
Or dost thou think of winging off some day
In bowers fairer fairer friends to meet ?
There is, my dear, a vernal malady
That kills not ripen'd fruit but buds yet green:
It eats into the heart like canker-worm;
It saps the soul, digs deep into the mind,
Raises a fever slow called *mahajwar*
It thins the flesh, makes wan the ruddy cheek,
And fills half-seeing eyes with visions sweet
That bitterly fond hopes can disappoint.
Within the heart it plants anxieties,
Like thorns in flesh, that send to palest death
The finest blooms. It even breaks the heart
And dooms, to grave untimely sacrificed,
A maid whose tears in pain unceasing flow'd.
Of this disease the symptoms are in thee,
For love-sickness is fed by solitude,
By world-avoiding, maiden broodiness
That visions sees of youth in twilight gloom.
At times dost thou at throat a choking feel,
At heart a knottiness, in voice a break,
A something sorely felt, untellable,
That speaks of hidden aches and silent cries ?
Be frank and speak, for many foolish maids
Have died in spring, like blooming trees that crack
Through lack of sap, a pitiful tragedy.
Thine eyes inquire what remedy there is:
To candid be and with sincerity
The truth to tell which by concealing die
Thou mightest. Ills of heart in open air
Are best corrected by self-confidence.
For pent-up feelings, like a boiler's steam,

The heart's container press to cracking-point.
Art evil-minded, bent on suicide
And hence concealest truth that life should rule
Just to destroy that life in fullest bloom ?
And all to keep a secret undisclosed !
Ahah, thou blushest ! This red blush reveals
Much more than words that simple maidens know
Thou hast a ruler in thy heart belov'd !
Shake not thy head, thine eyes betray the truth:
May friends not know his name" Shakuntala ?"

"No secret's mine," in all simplicity
The maid replied, "I'll tell thee what befell.
That evil day the bee my ears harass'd,
Upon my heart I felt some influence
That hangs thereon a heavy weight of gloom.
I try to speak it out but cannot tell
What on that day inside myself befell."

"Then write, not speak the words so delicate
They check the outpouring of thy candidness.
Here is a thorn, a pomegranate thorn:
It's sharp point blunted, like a harmless quill,
Will write on petals as a willing slave.
Wilt write or not ? Give answer 'Yea' or 'Nay'!"
So urging then her friend, Priyamvada
With gentle thumb the face downcast to raise
Attempted. Rising swift Shakuntala
A bloom of lotus picked whose glossy leaf
Lay brown and pendant on its upright stalk,
And pulling off a petal white as snow
Unstained, she took the proffer'd quill of thorn
And ran the point into the rosy flesh
Of left-hand finger till the crimson blood
Came beading forth and swelled and ran,
Like tiny serpent curving, down her palm.
She sat, with knee for desk, and symbols trac'd

That stained red letters on the lotus white.
The curving outline of her woman's script
Formed slowly; slowly ran her awkward pen
As words select to love-bewilder'd hands
Reluctant came. The letters slowly-stain'd,
Love-prompted letters, Priyamvada saw
O'er shoulder peeping. Thus the letters ran:
'I PINE FOR HIM, PROUD ROBBER OF MY HEART,
WHO KNOWETH NOT THE THEFT UNWITTING MADE.'

Meanwhile the other girls had gathered round
And strove to pry round Priyamvada's back.
"Oh screen her not," cried one; another adds,
"'Tis time this bud shall open to the light."
Then when they saw the writing they exclaimed,
"This secret veiled on leaf thou needs must tell
And let it breathe its freshness on the air.
The name, the name !: Who hath thy heart enthrall'd ?.
Shy of the invitation slowly she
'DUSHYANTA' wrote upon the lotus leaf,
And in her heart the name rang silent bells.
The beaming maids, exulting, crafty nods
And glances shrewd and smiles intelligent
Exchanged: "Thou art a queen of jungle halls
And royalty must look on royalty.
Right royal is he whom thine eyes have caught
And he on thee admiring glances cast.
His looks thy merit told in tacit praise.
Thy name subscribe; and we this love-letter
Full on his path will drop, and fate will see
It shall not miss. For true love's force
Assists the aim of love's contrivances."
At this she blushing baulked till gentle hands
Her shyness charmed, and then obliging wrote
'SHAKUNTALA' in letters firmly wrought.

All this the king from out his screen observ'd

And seized his golden opportunity.
With forthright step he from concealment came
Eaves-dropper bold; yet feigning ignorance
Of all their play Priyamvada address' d:
"How fairest thou fair daughter of the woods ?
Is father Kanva back ? Does harmony
As always reign in this thy hermitage ?"

"When shepherd strong protects the youthful flock
Nor preying wolf nor jungle scavenger
—The foul hyaena—dares to plan attack.
By thee protected lives this hermitage
In kindly light and has no sad complaints.
Our father-priest, still on his mystic quest,
His soul relaxes in some peaceful place
And sees the dawning light in easiness
Securely seated, care-free, undisturbed.
Protector of this hermitage we hail
Thy timely coming, for our fairy friend
Hath fairest words for thee this lucky day."

"And which," the king inquired, "of these fair maids
Thus seeks to honour me, her willing slave
In heart and ear, with words as soft as dew."?
"Shakuntala," she said in dulcet tones.
But she whose name was taken blushing pluck'd
A little flow'r and shook it nervously
Till all its many-coloured petals fell
Before her feet cascading, while her friends
To royal eyes the lotus-leaf display'd.
"Fairer by far are these sweet words to me
Than lines in decorated manuscript
Adorned with pearls and lapis lazuli,
With jewels ornamented. Shining stars
No brighter flash in vault cerulean
Than these bright words that tell love's mysteries".
Priyamvada surveyed with happiness

The loving pair: with shrewdness feminine
She feigned a distant duty, called her friend
Anasooya, who with the others left
On awn-light feet. The couple were alone.

The king advanced towards the trembling maid
And tender spake to calm her nervousness:
"Thy slave enthralled am I, Shakuntala;
Thy pleasure bent on knowing I await
As waits the moon-bird on his lunar love.
Those coral lips wilt thou not open now ?
Those pearly teeth display ? Or turn thine eyes
And look on me, a captive at thy feet ?
What wilt thou have me do ? I'll heav'n win
If such thy pleasure: only smile, oh smile
And I shall win for thee its very throne !
My queen of paradise, speak thy command !
Wilt see the stars in car celestial ?
Then speak and be uplifted to the blue.
May not thy slave receive his queen's command ?
A queenly gesture ? Task impos'd to test
By employment his ardent loyalty ?
One smile from that sweet face would lift my heart."

At his avowal much she felt confused:
Sweet were her thoughts; her visions, feelings sweet
So that on heart fell wonder tremulous
As if the world had op'd a fairy door,
A wondrous, magic door; yet half to flee
The nymph inclined from over-happiness,
And blushes came like light on morning snows,
And maiden shyness such that lids uplift
Her eyes could not nor lashes dropping low,
And throbb'd her quiv'ring lips in speechlessness.
Her heaving breast her agitation show'd:
She tries to speak, but tears, not words pour out,
So ignorant she is of lover's speech,

To passion offer'd how to give assent.
Yet through the weeping breaks a tender smile
Before she flees, flashing glance
Of plighted troth, troth plighted mutual.

The king to dream was left in solitude.

CANTO SIX

Durbasha's curse

**Spring buds are coy: they veil themselves with leaves.
But when the sun, low-lying still, begins
To thaw the coyness, they their veils unfold
And blush before the zephyrs' first approach.
Then bloom the buds and from their maiden breasts
The rising sap exhales a fragrant scent
That, wafted o'er the sylvan air, delights
The hearts of lovers. Woodland birds in pairs,
Their full-fledged plumage gleaming bright, to sing
Commence, and play with natural modesty
Their games of love. All nature courts and woos
With gesture, pose and movement instinctive.
All nature's creatures feel the throb of spring,
Its air that warms desire, its moon-lit nights
When nestled in each other's arms they dream.
So did Shakuntala, responsive now
To nature's prompting. Grown to womanhood
To royal advances now she welcome gave.
Delightful days they passed in solitude
By sun alone observed; and anecdotes
To flower-friends,—to rose-bush, eglantine,
To golden jasmine—telling rapturous.
Shakuntala the cuckoo's sleepy notes
Would hear by moonlight in Dushyanta's arms
In leafy bowers where they entertained
Themselves with mutual love-talk, and the hours
Like rolling wavelets sped in happiness.
The daylight hours, the hours of nightly joy
Alike enraptured; and, as lovers all,
They dreamed of life that others' life excell'd.**

On day appointed king Dushyanta led
His bride to woodland temple, on a tower
Of blossom'd branches propped. The wedding rite
Was celebrated in a woodland form,
Dictated not by parents but by love
That ranges as the vernal breeze uncurbed,
As water ripples freely, unrestrained
By narrownesses of authority,
Its sanction made by consent mutual.
A choir of birds the wedding music sang
E'en more than reeds and fifes harmonious:
Bagpipes the thrushes, drums the woodpeckers
Provided; doves down-breasted, mate to mate
Melodious cooing, sang a counterpoint.
The hymeneal dance was riotous !:
The long-tailed birds in rainbow plumage dress'd
Fluttered in fine array. The trees, the flowr's
Their leaves and branches shook and banners waved
Of verdure. Bees, like ceremonious priests,
Buzz'd hymns; and tinkled bells campanulae.
The forest whole, and all that therein lives,
With praise belauds their nuptial happiness.

The mother-nymph in heav'n, Menaka fair,
Was dancing. Oval-shaped, the lovely hall
With flowers was festooned that made the walls
To gleam like rainbo's; in the background rose
A water-fall gigantic, cleaving woods
That clothed the rich, green mountain-chains
—Decor sublime that Haya-Greeva made
To heavenly design. Calestial bands
Of golden lyres played accompaniment
And *tablas* beat a rhythm frenzy-fir'd.
On such a stage the ballet swirled and flowed;
The ballerina's robes in pirouettes
Flas'd and sparkl'd silver, green , and blue
As past the rocky crags of scenery

Divine she slanted. Tissues billowing,
She downward danced to where a choir of nymphs
In flow'ry robes were swaying to and fro
And shaking heads in choreography
Well-drilled. A wanton mischief smiling she
Swift hurled herself in joy of wildest fall
And silk transparent purled and fluttered till
The very air with rhythm palpitates.
Each rocky terrace as she falls a piece
Of raiment clutches and the tatters flings
Into the air: the very pieces dance
In rhythmic whirlings till, at final fall,
With dimming lights, in semi-nudity
She glides to ground in darkness triumphant.
The music flows to calm finale slow
And gods clapped hands in praise unanimous.

The dancing over, mother Menaka
Went through the budding woods in pensive mood.
The gods had clapped: flushed by success deserv'd
She buoyant went, her youthful face content,
Her heart with joy pulsating. With her friend,
The admiring Rambha, sportively she joked
Tomorrow's dance discussing. Yet there came
Upon her mind a queer anxiety,
A premonition strange, an alien thought
That smacked of earth. And stretching fancy far,
As fairies can, there came a certainty
Of some event on earth of deep concern:
Her daughter ! By telepathy she knew
It was today her daughter's wedding-day !
Across the curving river's crystal flow,
Across the woods and hills of heaven swift
She winged a desperate flight till from a peak
Of marble mounts she peering saw the earth.
Its globe through spheres of air translucent shone,
A bluish ball. In orbits round the sun

The planets dance a round elliptical:
Of these is the fairest. Tropic-zoned,
Hill-breasted, garbed in green, and ocean-starr'd
It whirls around the sun's majestic orb.
With some delay her eyesight keen discerned
The nuptial bower where great Dushyanta led
His fairy bride in wedding robes bedight,
And straining even harder saw the pair
Alone in happiness. But soon a haze
The vision blurred of violet mistiness,
Through which she nought could see. And dire unease,
A dread foreboding, premonition
Of evil ominous her troubled heart
Fast gripp'd. The dance's garlands round her neck
Were hanging still and these she earthwards threw.
At once a thunder-cloud terrestrial
Appeared black-vapour'd, frought with flashing fire,
And overcast the sky — an omen dire;
But as the flowers fell, a rainbow shone
Of seven colours arch'd, prismatic, bright,
Like Indra's heav'n-spanning bow aflame
—Auspicious sight that calm'd anxieties.
Unconscious yet of coming danger went
The wedded pair through woods by Malini,
And scented hopes fresh-budded. And the sun
Felt pleasant with its fragrance-laden warmth;
The birds told tales; so fair the flowers looked
That only here, they felt, was fairy-land.
If heavy clouds assembled, threatening rain
With sky o'ercast and gloomy weight thick-massed,
A pause it was, a lulling interval
When to their nest they went, just like the birds
Who warmed their half-fledged babies with their down
Or flew at times to snatch the pearly grains
Of rice by Brahmins thrown before a meal.
So thus the days that rose on golden wings
On golden wings went down to evening seas,

While spring, the king of seasons, graced the land.
This king installs in green seraglios
Of leaves his many-coloured concubines:
The birds, the beasts, the insects —Nature's world !
With yellow, purple, gold his feasts are spread
Upon his table; yet simplicity
This splendour marks—his food is jungle nuts,
His crest an emerald crown of leaves, the trees
His garlands give, his bells are rung by bees,
And grass provides the carpets of his halls.
In such a kingdom spent the royal pair
Contentedly a sylvan honeymoon
And passed their days in purest happiness.

But not for long ! For fate perverse that writes
Accounts, in red and black hieroglyphs,
Of mortal life, and passions, fears and hopes
Subtracts and adds, and tallies registers,
Ruled otherwise: there came from court the news
Of threatened peace and war tumultuous.

By thoughts of parting both were sore dismayed;
And many a tear coursed down the lovers' cheeks.
How would she pass in sleepless solitude
Those lonely nights ? In weeping to the stars ?
At such a prospect sad Shakuntala
At heart a fluttering felt, while Dushyanta
Could only sigh in great despondency.
For state is state, its king a purchas'd slave,
Subject of all his subjects, yoked to rule,
The corporate soul in individual
Majesty centr'd. His the hand that guides
The ship of state through waters turbulent
Or calm, as pilot not for pleasure born
But preying care, responsibilities.
Worshipp'd of all, a wretched fate he knows:
On bed majestic laid for sleepless nights;

On dainties feeds a meagre appetite;
A palace graces lonely poverty;
A crown on restless head the bears, and cares
To crush a sceptre carries; on a throne
He sits a sovereign, by anxieties
Encompassed. "Me thou rulest, sweetheart mine",
He told his wife, "but thy prerogative
The king usurps and robs thee of thy right
To keep thy slave when call of state demands.
Home would I take thy beauty's precious wealth
And call thee queen in loving unity;
But state demands and household obstacles
Prevent the quick acceptance of our wish.
Then cruel call me not if for a time
I need must leave thee to the cheerless hours
Of tearful solitude. For in my heart
Thine image reigns effaceless, permanent,
Nor fades its colour nor its art superb
By fancy fairer grown, and richer tone
It takes from living in my life emboss'd.
If death should come, thy deep engraved face
The angels seeing will admire its grace."
So saying soothed the king his weeping wife,
A heaving breast of sorrows keen as thorns,
Red-eyed and sobbing. He a promise made
Of news to send before the letters carved
Upon his signet ring by parting days
Should be out-numbered. But she wept and sighed:
She was, she owned, a maid enamoured,
A foolish girl, rut rather life would leave
Than parted be. Then he a promise gave,
A promise softly sweet, that ere a week
Had passed he would return. Away he went.

A day with promise dawned and fleeting sped;
The next with rosy hope, but hung blood-red
Upon the haze its day-long circling course

Till twilight, like an Indian widow robed
In grey (with *teeka* white on fore-head—badge
Of gloomy care) the western peaks illumed
A fleeting moment: then the curtains dark
Of night descended. Tears alone remained,
For no news came, nor came the cruel king.

One day it chanced that when the pining wife
Lost in the whirl of painful fancies, dropped
Unconscious of the world to seep, a sage
Durbasha called, a man of angry mood,
Of temper fiery, uncontrollable,
Enquired of her what place this was and whose.
But answer gave she none, in misery
So deep unhearing. Once again he asked
And yet again, but still she heeded not.
Thereon the crimson flames of wrath his face
Suffused, his cheeks grew red as glowing fire,
His eyes enlarged to terror-striking orbs,
And loud he thundered, "Woman, waxen doll,
Dost dare to mock me ? Art so passionate,
So sunk in lust degrading, that of rites
By duty due thou art oblivious ?
No woman thou, but painted trollop-face,
Unfit for woman's office, motherhood;
For, quick as candle burns, the flame of love
Thou wastest, lost in evil passion's thoughts.
As thou forgett'st the duty ow'd to guests
So by thy lover thou forgotten be !
This curse on thee deserving I pronounce
And turn my face from thee and go my way."

Yet still she heard not words so dread to hear,
So dead she was to all but misery.
But friends not far away pricked up their ears
More wakeful to the world, and hard the curse
So dread pronounced, and ran and threwn themselves

Before his feet, imploring suppliants.
In haughty unconcern implacable
He stalked away in silence, deigning not
To look upon them, till they sobbed and begged
And praying kneeled in importunity.
At last, as hardened rock its granite sheds
In silt before the rain, so he to them
Relented softening. But curses dire
When once pronounced cannot retracted be,
But only modified, he said: "Unless
Love's own true token to the king be shown
So long forgetful will his memory be."

Content therewith the maids light-hearted went
To where their friend in woe was still absorbed.
They stroked her cheeks of fading bloom; her eyes
They closed care-worn. And said Priyamvada
"In care, my friend, thou art so sunken deep
That Doom would come to thee inaudible."

CANTO SEVEN

Shakuntala leaves her Forest Home

Now Winter came descending from the snows
Of white Himalaya's hoary-headed hills.
From silver homes of northern snow and wind
He blew his blasting breath upon the earth
And froze the warmth: a dismal figure this,
A grey-beard grim with head bereft of hair,
With wrinkl'd brows all lin'd with ag'd cares
And blue-vein'd hands that coldly told his beads.
A sombre dress his palsied frame arrayed
Lack-lustre, colour-faded, all dishevell'd.
An idiot lean, to second childhood run,
He looked forlorn, a homeless wanderer.

With him the aged Brahmin, Kanva, came
From Somnath's sacred shrine his pilgrimage
Re-treading northward: on a staff he leaned
As twisted as a serpent, and beguiled
The weary way by telling Rama's beads.
A wiser man he came than went away
For god and nature had his days informed.
His feet were blistered, muddy; dust-begrimed
His beard; and deeper wrinkles rimmed his eyes
That keen as vultures scoured distances.
His left hand held secure *"kamandalu"*
The water-pot; and on the water-line
Thereof the sacred *"chandan"* glittered
On yellow *sal*-leaf lying, circumscribed
By wither'd flowers that the sage had culled
From pilgrim hands to southward. Joyously
His eyes exulting sights familiar
Of home beheld in dear proximity,

And light as thistledown his steps became.
At last he, beaming, saw the sacred grove,
And wand'ring on its edge Shakuntala
Still tender-eyed and dreaming of the love
That yet he knew not of, still sore oppress'd
And changed and thinned by love's uneasiness.
He walked with quicker steps; his palms he pressed
Upon her head in blessing paternal:
"God shield thee, child, from harm; not even thorn
Shall pierce thy flesh nor gritty particle
Of dust thine eyes offend; no cloud shall fall
Upon the sunshine of thy heart undimm'd.
Thy youth shall bloom as spring with joyfulness
And wealth and valour win in marriage meet
And children come, a blessed increment."

Startled by these last words Shakuntala
A deep obeisance made with join'd palms.
Then father-blessed she rose with beaming smiles
And nestled close in Kanva's warm embrace:
"Art well, my father dear ? How long thy way !
Fatigued thy feet must be, poor weary things !
And who thy pillow softened on the road ?
And who passed hands through all that long, grey beard ?
And who gave thee to eat, and who to drink,
And who beguiled with tales thy weariness ?"

In filial love she hung around his neck.
Her eyes her deep affection clearly showed
And long she wept like child longleft at home.
Then in came Gautami with low *salaams*
And washed his feet, and spread the *kush-ashan,*
And plied her gossippings solicitous
To learn his health and all occurrences
Of his long pilgrimage.

He sat content,
While wrinkled wife his aching ankles rubb'd,
And poured a flow, into their palms outstretched

And cupp'd, of holy water consecrate.
And this they sipp'd and touched their eyes and put
The faded flowers in their hair, and smeared
Their brows with 'chandan', weeping copiously
For joy at this return: "God shield our souls,"
They prayed.
Her altered form did not escape
The keen-eyed sage nor signs of pregnancy,
And conscious of his glance Shakuntala
Strained hard to hide the rosy reddenings
That flushed her cheeks; and in her nervousness
She rose and turned and ran to fetch a wreath
Of winter flowers, looks inquisitive
Intent to shun and guesses hazardous.
Then out of sight she stopped and chid her cheeks
And wondered, in the bower lingering.
His wife anticipates his questionings:
She tells the story of Dushyanta's love,
The tender courtship, marriage pastoral,
And summons to the court peremptory
That left his wife to languish, big with child.

"What message has he sent ?", the sage inquired.
"No message," she replied, "no single word."
Some time he paused, then added pensively:
"The lake the swan must find, her nest the bird.
And woman find her home. Full glad am I
To hear our daughter fair has set her heart
On great Dushyanta's magnanimity.
Content I am she will not leave the heights
Of lofty Himalaya, where the dawn
Extends its loving arms; and not displeased
To hear she is a queen. She hath fulfilled
My earnest hopes and aspirations fond.
Bright be her days and high her dignity."

Quick came the days in wint'ry hoariness

And quick they passed, more sleep than wakeful life.
In weakned sun the flowers disappeared
And thinned the streams, the leaves all wrinkled fell,
And Gautami drooped still more emaciate.
There came report that on his wars the king
Fair laurels won in arms victorious;
But news from him came none. Uneasiness
From silence bleak, far bleaker than the breaths
Of northern snows that fell upon the woods
And dried them up, upon Shakuntala
Descended: all unwarmed yet of the cold
Unconscious, numb she lay and stupified—
That child of spring !—and Gautami could see
The symptoms of her sad despondency.
Said the ag'd Kanva to his wife,
"Our daughter is a debt that must be paid
To him who purchas'd all her loveliness.
She came to us a nestling, and in warmth
We brought her up as parents loving-kind;
But wings have grown and off she needs must fly.
She was a stranger, born for foreign home,
Beneath our roof a welcome sojourner,
A temporary opportunity
To merit win by righteous charity.
But holy scripture has the rule prescribed
That pregnant wife within her husband's home
Must bear her child; so meet it is and right
Shakuntala should find her royal home.
Arrange therefore for her departure hence
And go thyself with her as guardian
Accompanied by Brahmins. Dost agree ?"
The aged wife consented; and the day
Was fixed for sending home Shakuntala.

As lake disturbed by summer show'riness
Feels gloom and brightness turn by turn display'd
By clouds that hang upon the sky's suspense,

So troubled was her mind. Came hope of home
And dreams of grandeur, arms of majesty
That would support her halting ignorance
Of gardens blooming, rich, luxurious,
Of lustre of the pomp to palace known
As maidens finely-decked who swing their fans
Of rainbow-coloured peacock-tails, and thrones
By master-craftsmen carved in precious gold
And dainty feasts arranged by protocol.
Through eyes of fancy all such visions passed
As through a poet's mind that in the clouds
Sees rainbows. Then the darker shadows came,
Cold doubts and dismal thoughts fears tremulous
That cloud the troubled mind. As thunder-storms
That roar from darken'd sky the sun obscure,
So they shut out the sweetest memories
Of nuptial bower and groves of love enjoyed.
Home too, her well-remembered, well-loved home,
—For home she called old Kanva's ashram still—
Her heart—strings pulled and tears came uncontrolled.

Then came the maidens comforting her grief:
One close embraced her, "Think Dushyanta thus
Extends his royal arms warm-welcoming."
She flung aside her friend's arm mischievous
In blushing petulance. Priyamvada
Her straying tresses guides with soothing strokes:
"Upon a golden throne thou shalt be queen
Seated beside his gorgeous majesty.
Myriad swords from out their scabbards leap
And myriad lances fright the rising sun
As choirs of myriad voices praise thy grace.
In silken robes with fringes serpentine
Thy countless servants, bending dutiful,
Will bring thee drink or paint thy toes or comb
Thy sable tresses and thy grace array,
To thy command attentive, maids assiduous.

On beds of roses shalt thou softly sleep.
The very moon will watch so envious
That earth will hazy be ! The Indian queen,
Fair Seeta, ideal wife, thou shalt outshine,
And after-ages will thy glory sing.
Thy life shall be unclouded, undisturbed
By stormy showers, for thy lord, betwiched
And ruled by thee, will clasp thee to his heart.
Thy blessed bed, in fortune conjugal,
Will fruitful issue have and large increase.
But we, bereft, shall moan our cheerless hours
And find no joy in life, no happiness,
And say, "Shakuntala has blotted out
Her one-time friends from friendly memory,
So lost she is in gla'rous paradise."

With angry eyes Shakuntala surveyed
Her sweet companion: "Do you mean, my friend,
I shall forget myself ? My heart, my soul ?
Forget to breathe and throb and see and live ?"
With firm but soothing words Priyamvada
Explained her meaning : "Dear Shakuntala,
You won't forget, we know. Yet time will work
Its treachery upon the memory.
When sweetest comes, forgotten is the sweet.
This humble grove by great magnificence
Of palaces will overshadowed be.
Our claims of love before *his* love will yield,
For heart dictates the ways of memory.
A haze surrounds the glow of distances
And stars by dazzling daylight are obscured.
With other thoughts obsessed, pre-occupied
With other cares, thou wilt oblivious
Of faces humble, humble homes become."

"But thou, at least', Shakuntala replied,
"Forgotten shalt not be: accompany

Thy friend, accept to be my guardian,
Adviser of my simple, modest heart."
And rising swift she went to Kanva straight
And said, "Dear father, if thy luckless child
Must leave this ashram so to her belov'd
For stranger home so alien, so remote,
May not she take her friend Priyamvada
As guardian and guide of her simplicity ?"
"That cannot be", the aged sage replied,
"For she her lord in holy union
Will take: another roof shall shelter her
And she shall have her proper home and hearth".
The maiden dropped, with tears her eyes were filled
Which sadly peered at father Kanva's face
As in a choking voice she plaintive asked :
"May I not be allowed with thee to dwell
Within this ashram and thy face to see
And hear the words of mother Gautami,
And play with friends at telling anecdotes
Both sweet and tearful ? Must I be exiled
To home unknown, to stranger halls, to eyes
Far stranger than the eyes of hunters strange
Who, lost, must come to drink in ashram-groves ?
They say that courtiers supercilious
Find fault with dress and manners: by exchange
Of cunning, crooked glance they criticise,
They nudge each other, turn their noses up;
They bite their lips or chew a sari's edge
To check their mocking laughter. Hypocrites,
They speak a double-meaning Simple souls
Like me they slight and scron, contemptuous
Of simple innocence. Why need I go ?
I feel a nervous fear, a shame, a dread
Of things unknown and faces alien
As distant sea-shores. Let me stay and love
Thy grey-haired grace, affection fatherly
While watering my darling flowers and shrubs,

And pass my days within these pious haunts
Securely sheltered. Do not cast me off."

His hand blue-vein'd through greying hair he passed:
"In search of home 'tis woman's destiny
To roam the world, if need be, with her mate.
Her parent's home is but a maiden-inn
Where boys are lords, but girls mere sojourners.
For sixteen springs was this thy shelt'ring nest;
But birds full-fledged must use their grown-up wings
To find their way about the wide, wide world.
The woman born must find her lord and mate
And man the wedded wife's protector be.
For home is woman's kingdom: there she rules,
And man abroad a lord, is slave at home.
The wife must fill her home with plenitude
Of light and joy, create an atmosphere
Of smiling sanctity where kith and kin
In amity embracing keep abode,
And where is nurtured every excellence,
The seed of every virtue nourished
That makes a nation strong and good and great.
That makes a nation strong and good and great.
Home thus conceived is very paradise,
A paradise on earth ! Pairs conjugal
Of Brahma and his *Maya*, Purush Prakriti,
Of Vishnu-Lakshmi, have such homes adorned
Through countless ages: on them angels smile
Approving smiles of love and innocence.
To woman, mistress of the hearth and home,
Her lord is god, almighty is this power,
Who rules her life incontrovertible:
And she is shadow to the reigning sun.
Be meek, my child: sway thus thy husband's heart.
Be humble, modest in thy dignity.
Be poor before thy lord and grow thus rich
In sympathy: so rule, by being ruled.

Unfold thy heart and be of all admired.
Light up thy love; be *lit.*; Be quick, and quicken,
All yielding, capture all. Thy whole soul giv'n
Thy lord shall be thy slave obedient.
Share all his cares and all his cares expel,
And care-less be e'en in anxiety.
Thy heart more quick than his desires prepare
Anticipating all; and they fulfill'd,
According gifts thy heart shall have of him.
Speak not a loveless word or syllable
That thoughtless slights; and if unleasantness
An utterance forces, flavour it with hope.
In woe adviser, nurse in sicknesses,
In play a sister be, in dalliance
A mistress, in the home a reigning queen.
Allay his fretful fevers tenderly.
Return no bitterness to foolish slight,
But smile placating. Let thy heart reflect
His morror'd image; and together reach
Through truth and beauty heights of love supreme.
Selfless, the mother finds in motherhood
Her highest joy: in nursing children sweet,
In teaching them to love, to live devout,
For home without a god is but a grave.
Then learn the love of god, and carry love,
Love reverential, to thy family
Whence love as from a shrine shall radiate."

Such teachings sage she heard obediently,
Yet could not check her tears nor break the hold
Of arms embracing father Kanva's neck,
For now the bearers came with palanquin,
And mother Gautami already dressed,
And twice-born two, with sacred top-knot tufts
Tied in the form of OM in Sanskrit write.
Then came with dew-wet wreath Priyamvada,
And all her friends, the chief Anasooya,

With lashes wet, and garlanded her neck:
"When shall we see thee next, Shakuntala ?,"
They cried, and all in floods of tears dissolved.
Said she, with choking voice, "My dearest friends,
My parents dear, when shall I see again ?
In stranger home my tears as rain shall flow
While ye, my woe unknowing, here shall flower."
Thereon came dancing up her favourite fawn
His mistress eager to accompany,
And now the tears, the speechless, pent-up tears
That welled and bubbled from her fountain-eyes
And rolled down cheeks, the while she patted him !
At last resigned, "God's ill be done", she said;
"I go. Fulfil I must my destiny."

Came father Kanva, came the other priests
His sandal-wearing pupils, came the maids
Up to the river's edge, and there they stopped.
For one should cross no bridge, old Kanva said,
To bid a sad farewell to traveller.
They all returned, all sighing, all distress'd:
"Our kunja's light is gone, Shakuntala !".

CANTO EIGHT

Shakuntala is rejected

Aloft the swinging shoulder-borne sedan
Was lurching, rocking to the monotone
Of humming bearers, o'er the wooded swells
Of undulating earth. Rich vistas green
Gave varied views of waving scenery,
Through which a river ran its winding course
And wreathed its silver circlings serpentine
That sparkled over bottoms murmourous
Of rounded pebbles, featured 'shaligrams'.
Like dusty 'nagini' the palanquin
Zig-zagged its weary way up hard-breathed slopes
And down the panting paths, where peasant maids
Rested awhile their toil-stained hands to gaze.
Day followed day and night the night: each dawn
The maid and mother went to take their baths
In gold-reflecting waters, where the stream,
In miooro splendid, hailed the coming day.
These baths great pleasure to Shakuntala
Provided: there she plunged, and rubbed her limbs
From snow to rose, and like a dolphin played,
And stirred the waves which laved and lapped and rocked
Her floating limbs, till Gautami reproved:
"Too long thou playest, child; the chilly dawn
Will give thee cold". Thereon the water-nymph
Emerging, down her naked snow-white limbs
She let the droplets fall, and ran her hands
Around her thighs and breasts in consciousness
Of swelling youth, wiped herself and dressed.

Yet dear, how dear, how deadly dear this sport
Was doom'd to cost her ! From her hand, unknown,

Dushyanta's ring from circl'd finger slipp'd
Into the thieving waves. A hungry fish
The sparkling jewel spying took it for
A pearly rice-grain: greedy, ravenous
It darted up with wildly-beating fins,
Its eyes protruding, mouth agape to seize
The morself, which with such voracity
It gulped it scarce remarked its tastelessness.

Dushyanta now, o'er foes victorious,
On car triumphant, gaily garlanded
Was entering his capital. He passed,
Unhasty, lines of cheering multitudes
Who threw the red 'aveer', the 'durbadal'
Pearl-woven, grains of husked and col-oured rice,
In swelling welcome. As he bowed and smiled
And slowly climb'd the palace steps, festoon'd
With garlands, through their curving ivory tubes
The trumpets blared a paean conquering
And cymbals clashed and minstrels glorified.
Within his rooms a heavy weight he felt
Upon his conscience, born of self-reproach
For fear the sight of carnage in the field
Has stunned his softer sensibilities.
He called for music, that the tender chords
Of soft-struck lyres might wake his torpid soul
And singing reeds and drone of quiv'ring strings.
The 'roon-jhoon' of the rainbow-noted 'veen'
That grades from hard to tender 'raginis'
Speaks more than woodland birds to wounded heart
That down the breezes, through unnumbered leaves,
Are warbling, and its chords so cordial
Bring sweet response as through the veins they thrill.
The king Madeira drank, while listening,
From golden bowl bejemm'd, and as he sipped
The tranquilising liquid, maidens gay
In cinctur'd dresses whirled their pirouettes,

Upon their feet were silver tinkling bells
And round their temples primroses entwin'd
With golden jasmine, while their rounded breasts
The scent of 'kanak-champa' hid, or 'kastoori'
Their rosy nipples——peaks of red on snow !!
Their brows were arched by smiles as on the grass
They postured, taking poses artistic,
And swayed and danced to swinging harmonies
Or sang themselves like bulbuls. Birds indeed
Came singing to the dance: the blackbirds, doves,
The 'shyama' and the 'pattu', nightingales
And peacocks, echoing warblings rapturous
That they had caught in woods of paradise.
In heav'n itself the winged 'apsaras'
On fleecy lawn the dancing reproduced
So lovely was it. Yet still unalloyed
The king's unease persisted, louring gloomily,
As through his torpid memory there strove
To quicken into aching life a dream
Forgotten—tender, bitter-sweet a dream !
"What ails me, sir ?", the king his jester asked
And he replied: "A fever gnaws thy heart
By carnage numbed." For both were ignorant
Of dread Durbasha's curse that made the king
Of love, of marriage-vows oblivious,
Oblivious of his wife Shakuntala
Who pined in ashram groves like fading flower.
And pined the king, and sighing drooped, nor knew
The cause. The weary days lamenting pass'd
In heavy weight of heart, that made him fret
And fume in bursts of sullen temperament.

There then arrived the long-lived Gautami
In all her wrinkled dignity, despite
The fur rows writ by taunting time, the hair
All silver'd, legs like bamboo-stalks deformed
And toothless gums. Up palace steps th she climb'd

Her daughter following, on the velvet cloth
That clothed the marble stairs, past statuettes
Of golden fairies; through the porticos
By swordsmen guarded whose mustachios,
To ears up-curling, and whose scimitars
Of burnished steel in hands uplifted high
Caused consternation; down the vestibules
Whose marble walls were decked with artistry
That mountains, rivers, temple-spires and gods
Delineated on the tapestry;
By jewell'd chambers, halls of luxury
—And then at last to throne-room resplendent.

The brooding king looked up: no sign he gave
Of recognition, nor did smile to smile
Give answer: fortune's wheel full circle turn'd
Estranging love, ensnaring memory !
His angry scowling check'd Shakuntala,
Her smile arrested, scenting injury.
"How could'st thou, lord", her heart desponding asked,
Deceive me thus ? Did fairer flow'r betwitch
Thy sense lost ? Thou heart of adamant,
Thou flinty rock, unfeeling stone (yet dear !),
Thou icicle as cold as winter bleak
Canst thou, untouched of sorrow, unprovoked
By care, on beds of roses laid at ease,
Conjecture what it is to be
A wife forgotten or a love forlorn ?
What pangs my heart bereaved at parting felt
Cant thou conceive, thou stony-hearted man ?"

Shakuntala had planned her interview
As wily woman: for an interval
A tearful silence would she first observe
Reproachful, and be coaxed with blandishments
To slow surrender to a penitent !
Instead she stood in sad bewilderment

Before those eyes, unlit by beaming light
of recognition: "Deep in thought engag'd
He hath not seen," she whispered to herself
Her heart to soothe, where fear had bitten deep.
Her lips began to quiver; mistiness
Obscured her wistful eyes where tears upswell'd
And burned her cheeks with shame and giddiness.
She strained her nerves to master, bold to speak
To eyes that deigned nor turn nor recognise:
"Thy wedded wife am I, Shakuntala.
Gandharva rites of marriage joined us twain
A soul to soul, heart unto heart combin'd.
And, long forgotten in my tearful grove,
Daughter of Kanva and of Gautami,
I bring for thine acceptance wifely love
To thee, great king, whose word and nobleness,
Like 'dharma', prop the entire universe."
With hopeful blushes red, with low salaams
She neared the throne. Whereon the startled king
In anger reprimanded: "Wherefore touchest thou
My Kshatriya pride ? That I thy wedded lord
Became is falsehood, pure mendacity,
A lying tale."

Thus fell the bolt direct
From cloudless blue. As when the 'krauncha' bird
On northward flight is dazed by lightning flash
It blenches: so shrank she and flinching quail'd.
But Gautami stepped forward: "Soulless king,
Hast thou no heart, no conscience ? Golden crown
Art thou and nothing more ? A puppet blown
By adulation's breath, who thus forgett'st
The wife thou wedded ? This is mere pretence
Of memory lost, 'tis pure deceitfulness."
She soothed the child, now weeping copiously
Whose heaving breast was choked with sobs
And rising cries could scarcely be suppress'd.

The curse that made the king oblivious
Had not destroyed his inborn kindliness,
And he began in real perplexity:
"If true it is this maid and I were wed,
It was in summer dream ! Or doting age
Had reft me of my reason, cracked my mind."
But soon he turned to anger, "Lying crone,
What haggard stories born of corners dark,
Where crazy madmen lie and ruminate,
Art thou inventing ? Witches webs to weave
What devil prompting broods above thy head
And twists thy thoughts ? There is no syllable
Of truth in these thy tales. This woman fair
—For fair she is in feature—is deceived.
I never knew her, never touched her form
Nor opened lips to address. No temple bells
Rang out our nuptials to celebrate.
No !, No !—he turned towards Shakuntala—
Thy husband am I not, nor did thee arms
Enfold thee ever. Thy seducer, say,
Was he my likeness ? Did he, impudent,
Usurp the use of king Dushyanta's name ?
His life is forfeit: his audacity
Is traitrous. I and I alone am king ¡"

"Thou art a king ?", a voice in thunder roar'd
From Brahmin priest in Kanva's entourage
—red-faced like Bhima when he swung his club
To strike at Keechak for his Draupadi,
For Brahmin priests adore god's truthfulness
And lies refute in anger passionate—
'A king is one who stands upon the truth,
Not one fess'd up in shameful dignity
That treachery conceals and perfidy.
Thy crown is paste, thy jewels counterfeit,
Thy throne a bauble, for thy rule prevails
Through terror's sceptre, power tyrannous,

And not through nobleness of mind. Thou rake
Libidinously foul and lewdly low,
This woman's heart thy lust has murdered:
Accept thy wife; or else the way to truth
From thee thyself one day will vengeance take.'
Their rising tempers to conciliate
Thus Gautami addressed the angry king:—
"O majesty, allay thy rising wrath
Nor frowning fret, but on truth meditate
That mightier is than sword. Restrain thyself
To hear our tale that neither lunacy
Nor witchcraft is, nor fable fabricate.
With cares of state, with wars and ills oppress'd
Thy memory refresh: this picture see,
Look on this tragic maid, Shakuntala,
Hast thou forgotten her ? The holy grove
Of Kanva hast forgot and how thou cam'st
To hunt the ashram deer swift-footed, fleet ?
Canst not remember how the ashram nymphs
Thy slaughter checked, restrained thy sacrilege,
Nor how thou cam'st to meet Shakuntala
Whose grace bewitch'd thee ? There thou dwelt secure
For several months; and rites connubial
'twixt thee and her in peasant ritual
We celebrated. Then by state recalled
Thou didst thy wife abandon, promising
A quick return. But cam'st thou not, nor news;
And Kanva found her big with child and said
' As custom bids, send home Dushyanta's queen,'
And as he ordered so we brought her here.
These things thou must remember ! Will perverse
Alone commands god's truth to disbelieve."

Dushyanta rose in wrath majestical:
In solemn tones his child's paternity
He formally rejected, ordering
Them leave his court or risk his punishment

४०१

As tricksters, fabricators, charlatans.
His towering anger cowed Shakuntala
Who blanched before the words that seared her heart
As heat burns pilgrims in a desert waste
Where sun, like furnace-blast, beats pitiless.
But strength she found, the strength that mothers fills
When hurt to offspring threatens, for her child
Unborn, to try again her rights to claim
As wife and mother, pregnant wife and queen !
She stirred herself: the blood of sage and nymph
Flow'd strong within her, gave her dignity;
And as the rising sap a flow'r's crown
Will raise resplendent, so to majesty
Restrained yet noble hope in hopelessness
Uplifted her. It gave to tongue-tied voice
A flowing freedom, stately utterance,
To eyes a sparkle, lip an eloquence
That poured from heaving breast her grievances.
"Is it the fear of scandal's gossipping
That cows Dushyanta, lordly conqueror
By talk intimidated ? Is my birth
So mean, so humble that Dushyanta feigns
A memory lost on purpose to deny
Me ? Noble souls uplift: the regal sun
By raising waters from the humble sea
Stains not its dignity, but richer shines
With brighter glory when the gloominess
Of rising clouds it high illuminates
With hands refulgent. Is Dushyanta then
A noble statue merely, dead within,
Devoid of heart, emotion, tenderness
Or conscience ? Even beasts their constancy
Maintain: dove dove remembers; Dushyanta
Is lower than the animals, yet king ?
Am I a royal plaything, moment's toy
Enjoyed and tossed aside when royal lust
With easy game too its satiety ?"

९२७०८

She tried to melt his pitiless disdain
By facts recalling of their happiness
By Malini, the nymph Priyamvada
And Anasooya's mischief, trivial
Events that are to lovers souvenirs
Of blissful moments.

Mark the potency
Of Sage's curse !: her passionate appeal
No answering response evoked, no word
Recalled of pages dead to memory.
Far otherwise : in anger real the king
Denied their tales as fabrications pure
And bade them go; nor was his steadfastness
Relaxed when th' angry Brahmin thunder'd forth
A dreadful curse: "I curse thee, evil king:
May'st thou on earth no peace, nor grace receive
In heav'n-hell thy spirit to eternity
Shall keep in darkness. Such a punishment
The wretch deserves who wedded wife rejects."

The Brahmin's curse dismay'd Shakuntala
Who proud yet held her head and steadfast ey'd
The ruthless liar's stony majesty;
The, turning left the throne-room. Gautami,
Hobbling behind, began to soothe the girl:
A welcome warm in ashram amity
From kith and kin awaited where a queen.........
"That shall not be", the Brahmins firm insist;
"Cast off she is, in caste abominate
Degraded wand'ring, whom in pregnancy
A man rejects: nor touch nor food nor drink
We will accept from hands unsanctified
Nor will we eat beside her. Go thy ways,
Thy lonely, casteless ways, Shakuntala."

They dragged away the mother homeward-bound
Protesting vainly caste is adamant !

The thunderbolt had stunned Shakuntala:
She neither mov'd nor wept nor heaved her breast
But like a cloud on mountain motionless
She stood, till lightning-flashes cleaved the sky
And drops of quiv'ring rain her mind awak'd.
Then through the garden paths insensible
She mov'd, unconscious of her tragedy.
Down craggy slopes, by torrent beds she pass'd
By brush and briar, treading hypnotised
A way haphazard, till she reached at last
A lotus-pond, whose smooth, green-velvet leaves
The sparkling rain-drops garner'd, radiant
Like tears on praying eyes. By weariness
Exhausted, on its grassy marge she sank:
As falls a flower when a tempest breaks,
So fell this figure tragic.

Menaka—
From heav'n was watching. Mother-pity drove
Her headlong earthwards, cleaving clouds apart
On outstretched wings: no sooner touched the earth
Tan up she lifted, clasped to bosom white,
Her fainting daughter, whom she bore aloft
As swift as wind. Upon his citadel
Of ancient rock, by sunset's rays illum'd,
Still sat the aged Kashyapa devout,
Half-blind from looking into secret deeps,
Ash-smeared, dishevell'd: there Shakuntala
Was gently dropp'd in safety sanctified.
Then back to heav'n's work flew Menaka.

Meanwhile in lakelet some day's walk remote
From royal city stood a fisherman.
All lean he was and wrinkled: wiry legs
Like bamboo stalks upheld his giant frame
And on his bones the tight-stretch'd skin was bright
From many washings. Suddenly the line

Grew taut; a monster 'rehu' fought the hook
In jaws entangled, struggling valiantly.
The fight was long, but when at last it lay
Upon the bank, a fish so eminent
It proved in size that fit for royalty
The fisher thought it: dainty is its flesh,
As sweet as nymph-kiss deemed by epicures !
The king received him graciously, his gift
As graciously accepted with reward
Abundant. After short elapse of time
From kitchen ran a startled servitor
To show the king a golden ring removed
From "rehu"-belly, bearing on its seal
'Dushyanta' carved in flow'ry characters.
And as he took it, recollection flash'd
Upon his torpid mind: 'Shakuntala',
He whisper'd agonised, "Shakuntala,
My darling wife." He beat his grieving breast
And floods of tears poured streaming from his eyes
Down gloomy cheeks, for still he understood,
Unknowing aught of sage Durbasha's curse,
No reason for his thoughtless cruelty.
Of sin to god he free confession made:
He was the sinner reprehensible
Against a woman wholly innocent.
He begged forgiveness, comfort none receiv'd
Deep in his conscience, nor through all that day
Did anything delight him: viands rare
And sweetest music, 'sherbet' almond-rich,
And dancing dress'd with grace and ornament
—All, all were ashes ! Through the night entire
He wept, repeating "Oh, Shakuntala."

CANTO NINE

Strife & Unity

Menaka had laid her child Shakuntala
In Kashyapa's hut, in sleep oblivious.
A room all mean and humble, neat withal,
Met her awak'ning eyes. The furniture
Was rustic, strewn with skins of animals,
That for a moment made her think herself
At home in Kanva's ashram. But the view
Through glassless window was of mountain-peaks
And clouds and snow and vistas limitless
Of woods and rolling valleys. On a mound
Nearby sat sage in meditation sunk;
But as she gazed in wonder he began
To speak with voice full-ton'd, profound and deep:
"Fret not, my child: of welcome be assured
In this my humble home. The gods decree
That for some seasons thou shalt here reside
And bear thy child and let him sturdy grow.
From inner wisdom I thy story know
And will from time to time as much reveal
As to the gods seems wisest. Curs'd thou wert
By Durbasha, of Brahmins most inex'rable,
Who deemed the rites of hospitality
Thou hadst neglected—hence the tragic scene
'Twixt king and thee; yet blame Dushyanta not
For him alike the force of destiny
Controls, till fate reveals the appointed time
Which shall accomplish heav'n's purposes.
Meanwhile thou art a welcome sojourner
In this my mean abode. Whatever store
I have is thine."

Dushyanta frets and fumes

Meanwhile on earth for many weary months
And rolling seasons bring no slackening
Of fruitless search, of grief no lessening.
To him one day, still sunk in aimless gloom,
Came Indra's charioteer, great Matali,
"Airabat" driving through the scudding clouds,
Along the rainbow where its grandeur spann'd
The soaring spaces. Thus he spoke:
"The Kalanemis, race of giants dread,
Menace the peace of halls aetherial
With threats of war that all annihlates.
Our lord himself, the ruler of the gods,
The thousand-eyed, the rainbow-bearer, dreads
Their awesome might that devastation works
As swift as whirlwind. Grim-fac'd warriors,
They seek to conquer by rebellion
The throne of heaven. On swift wheels they come,
Like locust-swarms, projecting poison'd shafts
With blacken'd points. Your majesty himself
Is by our lord invited him to join
Their pride to humble; then victorious
To earth thou shalt return, and 'apsaras'
Shall garland thee, as cars celestial
Escort thee home in triumph glorious."

The aerial car had Vishwakarma built
From oval crystal-prism, rainbow-hu'd
With threads of gold gay wreaths of amaranth
The 'apsaras', to form canopy,
Had woven. When gigantic birds uprise
They first their wings unfurl and beat the air
With stirrings huge till they gain altitude,
And then they wheel and hover thro' the clouds
That roll in whiten'd masses in the sky,
By rising currents borne. But Indra's car
Shot upwards straight with great velocity,

For goddess of the lightning, Bijuli,
Its speed directed. On its prow she stood
In flaming vestments poised athwart the air.
On piles of velvet cushions wove of rose
Dushyanta sat reclining: on his brow
He proudly bore his crown, and shoulder-slung
His right arm held the bow Queen Durga gave,
That mighty bow ! With speed vertiginous
The car the clouds transcended into air
Whose cold the sunlight tempered. Astronauts
Such views enjoy as now Dushyanta saw:
The undulating clouds, the hills the vales
That break the beating sunlight's dazzlement,
The seas of rolling vapour, silver-grey
Like mounds of cotton. Here the firmament
Was icy-blue like lapis lazuli,
And now the thinning air its genial warmth
Had lost, and breathing would laborious
Have been had not a breath of amaranth
Been balmily wafted from the atmosphere
Of heav'n itself, relaxing straining lungs.
For now the great 'viman' to 'Abaha'
Had reached, where gravitate the galaxies
In dustless ether, lovely, luminous.
Some swing in circles, some ellipses take
In complicated orbits multiform.
In words this view is indescribable,
Much more than saintly dream magnificent,
More order'd than a sage's mind, spell
In motion swung of mighty harmonies.
By power divine these lucent spheres rotate
Revealing as they move God's majesty.
The car shot through the portals crystalline
Of heav'n itself; and now Dusyanta's eyes,
His mortal eyes, were dazzled by the sights
Unknown to mortals. Through the gloomy tracts
He passed where penitents innumerable

Are struggling upwards; through the spheres of '*sat*',
Of '*tama*', '*raja*', where the spirits live,
Some cold and gloomy, some so dazzling
That mortal eyelids cannot tolerate
Their incandescence. Now enlightenment
Burst on the king: eternal mysteries
Of life and death were to his mind display'd.

Lord Vyasa, hoary-headed, holds the key
Of heaven's golden gates which opened wide
On silent hinges. Heaven stood revealed !
It is not meet in words presumptuous
Celestial glories to delineate.
Before the grandeur indescribable
Stood heaven's king, Lord Indra, welcoming
At palace-gateway. Robes immaculate
Of saffron-colour clad his form divine.
Above his crown there shone the aureole;
His right hand grasp'd the freaded thunderbolt,
His left a bow—the symbols of his might;
On winged sandals made of orient gold
He came to greet the king with bearing proud,
And, following, the gods obedient
Made up his entourage: to all of whom,
But most to Indra, king Dushyanta gave
His deep obeisance.

Thus Lord Indra spake:
"On earth great is thy fame; and millions
Thy praises sing as king and warrior:
Thee then I chose against the Kalame
To war on our behalf, the demons foul
Who drive their lumbering chariots of death
To threaten heaven's peace. Attack their king
Deep in his dismal kingdom, ere he can
His vows perform that his battalions,
With clamorous force and bristling armament,

Will havoc wreak on our dominions.
Yet rest awhile: one day to rlaxation give,
Then clip this demon's wings rebellious."
He led Dushyanta through the crystal halls,
Through halls of gold, of lapis lazuli
And emerald, to where a banquet-hall
Was filled with waiting gods and goddesses.
A sumptuous feast of food celestial
Was spread before them; there Dushyanta sat,
The guest of honour, 'twixt Queen Indrani
And Indra king of heav'n, whose majesties
The vast divine assembly dominate.
They nectar drank, ate food ambrosial,
And watch'd the ballet, whirling arabesques
Of 'apsaras' whom Rambha led, of dance
The prima ballerina. Orchestras
Accompanied with heav'nly harmonics.

Upon the bounds of Kalanemi's realm
The gods assembled: missiles various
They bear: clubs, tridents, lances, bows
Of superhuman measure coruscate
As they came roaring down the azure paths.
Conch-shells they blow—the 'shankha' resonant—
And blare the trumpets, clash the brazen gongs,
And cymbals clang—a monstrous clamouring !
The king arrived and all his host reviewed:
He stood upon a mound apart and gaz'd
Into the gloomy realm of demons foul,
And then the signal gave—an arrowshaft
That swift from Durga's bow its challenge sped.
A mighty shout uprose and drums and fifes
Each answered other as the hosts engaged.
By Kalanemi led the demons came,
Huge, hairy, bristling giants mountainous
Who roared and brandished clubs of logs unhewn
And poison'd arrows shot and filled the sky

With flying lances, weapons venomous.

Compare these armies: powers of evil rang'd
Against the good. The former, drunkards all
Who gorge and glutton, arms of darkness bore,
Defiance thundered, rape and rapine sought,
And all their thoughts were dark and murderous.
But nobly stood the former, champions
Of virtue, hope, religion, liberty
And peace; white were their arms and white their plumes
And white their thoughts of love and truthfulness.
When good and evil meet fierce is the fight,
And so the battle raged as when a sea,
By whirlwinds stirr'd, colossal breakers throws
'gainst adamantine rocks. Roars thunderous
Resounded through the shaken firmament.
Steel clanged on steel; and foaming war-horses
With flaring nostrils in confusion charg'd
In headlong gallop blind, and chariots
Rolled clattering across the battlefield.
Soon cries of pain arose, shrieks dolorous
And howling rent the air as thousands fell
Mauled, maimed or murdered on the crimson earth.
The gods were wounded sore by poison'd barbs;
But gods rejoice in immortality,
And unguents balmy smearing on their wounds
Intact they soon rejoin'd the fray. Aghast
However, sore affrighted, sore dismay'd
They trembled once, for so innumerable
These dreadful hosts of fuming demons came
With flashing eyes and muscles stretch'd intense
And dreadful weapons brandishing in swarms
That doomed the gods appeared to overthrow.
But now Dushyanta gave encouragement
To shrinking warriors: his potent arm
Dhanyastra, goddess Saraswati's gift,
Gave him the power the wicked to confound

And magic to perform. So now a miracle
Was work'd: sweet music filled the firmament
With strings of flutes and pipings exquisite
That charm'd the ear and held the listener
Spell-bound with wonder; thoughts of mysteries
Enwomb'd, emotions tremulous, desires
Unearthly, secrets supernatural,
Came floating softly through the melodies.
Thereby enraptur'd all the demons stood
Bereft of motion: inactivity
Their hands and hearts, their martial ardour check'd
And turn'd their rancorous minds to sweeter thoughts.
So when the magic music stopp'd at last
Listless they fought as if indifferent
To further conquest, gain or victory,
And when their monarch fell, resistance too
Collapsed; for peace terms unconditional
They begg'd the gods, and dropp'd their armament.

Thus was the victory won: rebellion,
That heav'n defied, by music's magic strains
Was crushed and humbled. Now victorious
The gods their conches sounded triumphant
And, crowding round, the leader's praises sang:
"Great is Dushyanta, great as Britraha !"
Such cries accompanied him as in his car
To heav'n he journeyed, raised of all and sung
As victor, leader, general, and king.
There Aditi, the mother of the gods,
Him welcom'd tenderly with grey-hair'd grace.
And Britraha, the Britra-killer, came
Exulting in his flowing saffron robes,
And hailing him as colleague glorious
A garland gave, to take as souvenir,
Of amaranth immortal.

Retraced in triumph his return to earth
Through starlight faint, through spheres of bleakest gloom,
To sunlit paths of constellated stars
Where dancing worlds, incalculably vast,
Like sand-grains whirl'd across the firmament.
As Earth looms large one feature dominates
The universal scene: a brotherhood
Of snowy peaks that rise in grandeur wild
And stretch their silver'd walls Cyclopean
To take the sun-god's hand. Himalaya,
That mighty giant, lords it o'er the earth
And hangs the heavens on his shoulders grey.
There Parbati, with Shankar, sits serene.
As Dushyanta, in car celestial,
Survey'd this wondrous scene,a flaming peak
Stood out in grandeur: "Driver Matali,
What mount is that ?" he asked, "that lifts a crown
Of gold into the heavens ?" He replied,
"'tis Hemakuta call'd, the paradise
Of sages, where in peacefulness austere
An aged hermit squatting meditates
Amid the bristling pines." "O thither turn
Thy car, for long I've had a keen desire
To meet that sage, of wisdom all compact,
Whose inner eyes can scan the mysteries
Of Earth and Heav'n." The skillful Matali
Accordingly then veered the chariot
Towards the mountain: soon the king could see
The scenes that to a mystic bring content;
And soon beneath the peak through pine-woods walked
Whose needles rustled and the rare birds sang
And mountain streams, in musical cascades,
Ran twisting downwards. Bracing was the air,
With coolness tranquil; but tranquillity
To Dushyanta it brought not, for its peace
Revived the bitter self-reproach that war

Had for a time repress'd. "Shakuntala,
Where art thou now, alone where wanderest
In withering distress ! My cruelty
Did cast thee off, abandon thee to fate
A lovely, helpless blossom. Every flower
Recalls thy blooming youth, those tender eyes
That somewhere now bewail thy tragedy."

The king emerged into a forest glade
Where, with a servant, played a chubby child
Two summers old. Large, lustrous eyes he had
And raven hair that framed an oval face
As sable clouds enhance the vernal moon,
And handsome, striking features. Fearlessly
A lion's cub he dandled, opening
Its dreadful mouth, undaunted by the teeth
So long and sharp, which counting on his hand
He numbered with a childish shout of joy.
"A child like this might mine have been, so fair,
So noble with such lisping loveliness,
Pink-cheek'd and princely, leonine
Of heart as is the very cub he pets
In fearless play." Thus mused the pensive king;
And sad his thoughts, his aching tenderness
Blazed up afresh and left him sorrowing.
"What name is thine", he asked, "thy parents where
That leave thee lonely playing ?" Frank and clear
The child replied: "I come from heav'n, I;
Where reigns my mother, goddess Ambika,
And lions keeps; large is my family
For all men are my brothers, everywhere.
O ! look my lion yawns………"—in babyishness
He clapp'd his hands and jerked an amulet
That fell from off his wrist——"O, catch it, please,
Please get my fallen 'jantra', Budhiman."
The king bent down to grasp the talisman,
But mystic voices filled the ambient air:

"Touch not or else you die," but undisturbed
The king the 'jantra' seized. Then, wondering,
The servant spoke, "My lord, this amulet
Protects the child by magic: it defends
'Gainst rav'ning lion or from injury
By wolf rapacious, jungle dog, or fiend
Or demon; but the skill of Kashyapa,
The sage who tied this magic knot, ensures
This child alone or his own parents selves
May touch it, else, into a serpent turn'd,
'Twill sting to death hand unfamiliar."
The servant paused: he saw the amulet
The king, unharm'd, was holding. Certainty
Came slowly to him: "Thou Dushyanta art ?"
He asked in awe; "the Great Dushyanta, thou,
Ally of Heav'n ?" The king replied, "I am,"
With simple pride, his eyes upon the boy,
His voice with fondness thicken'd and desire.
"Shakuntala;" he murmured, "O, Shakuntala;"
But not so low the child, "Shakuntala,"
Repeating said, 'that is my mother's name."
Then was Dushyanta overcome with joy,
With heartache too, and he could only stand
And gaze and gaze in wonder motionless.

Meanwhile the servant rush'd in breathless haste
The distance short to where by tress conceal'd
Stood Kashyapa's hut, for there Shakuntala
Was picking flowers for Krishna's garlanding.
The months of mountain peace and motherhood
That closed the deep experience of grief
At her rejection, had maturity
And calmness brought: she was more lovely still
With grace of youth, yet full development.
She turn'd surprised towards the messenger,
The servant gasping, "Dushyanta has come."
Then slowly turning, as the breezes turn

Towards the rising sun, in majesty
Severe, with measured gait, she made her way
Towards the glade, as if invisible
A string was drawing mate to parted mate.
How beautiful she looked ! More beautiful
Than starry skies in night's tranqillity,
More lovely than the moon that lights the edge
Of silver clouds—a soul at last at peace !
Dushyanta watch'd her sandall'd feet, with dew
Besprinkled, for with tears his eyes were filled,
But as at last, demurely shy, the bunch
Of flowers she proffer'd, eye met eye with love
And deep affection. Thus they met again.

"My darling, O my love, Shakuntala,
My only love, forgive my cruelty
That robbed thee of thy rights and me of wife
Beloved. Let us all this misery
Forget, these wintry thorns, my soul benumb'd
By curse oblivious, remembering
The fairer days of love and ecstasy
And thinking only of the future bright.
Come then, Shakuntala, and reign again
As queen secure upon my heart enthron'd."
Then how they wept, conjoin'd in sweet embrace,
Wept all the pent-up tears of loving hearts
For winter gone, for spring now fresh arriv'd.
They wept as lovers at last reconciled.

The sage then blessed them, gave them wise advice:
"By god's decrees your conduct regulate,
And live by Truth whence cometh beauty, love
And grace that casts its spell upon the soul.
Your sway shall be as wide as is your Truth,
Your kingdom lasting as your Truth is strong.
Let Peace abound, its blessings manifold
Outpouring freely over all mankind,

Upon your mountains, on your plains and vales.
When ye are gone, this child shall rule the earth,
Prince Bharat, who of kings most glorious
To this our godly land his name shall give
And future ages shall it Bharat call
And sing the story of his parent's love.
Tears will they pour upon its tragedy
And hear with beaming smiles its joyous end,
How here united ye were blest of me."

United thus the royal pair returned
To hearth and home, where loyal multitudes
With great rejoicings and warm welcome cheer'd
Dushyanta, Bharat, and Shakuntala.

□

Glossary of Sanskrit and Nepali Words

A

Abaha	a heavenly sphere
Aditi	the mother of the gods
Aditya	son of Aditi; sungod
Airabat	(also Airavat) divine elephant, Lord Indra's vehicle; cloud
Amatya	King's minister
Ambika	Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva; her epithet
Amrit	drink of the gods; nectar
Ananga	bodiless; epithet of Cupid
Anasooya	(Also Anusuya) playmate of Shakuntala
Apsara	fairy; angel
Ashram	hermitage
Aveer	red powder colour
Asan	sitting manner or cushion

B

Bailey	a kind of flower
Banaspati	(also Vanaspati) vegetable world; god of vegetable world.
Bansi-Dhari	Lord Krishna
Bharat	Sanskrit word for India.
Bhima	second among Pandawa princes (vide Mahabharat)
Bijuli	electricity, goddess of lightning
Brahma	god of creation
Brahmin	highest caste Hindu, preceptor name of god

Britra	(also Bitra or Vritra) name of a demon killed by Lord Indra
Britraha	killer of Britra; epithet of Indra
Brindavan	(also Vrindaban) name of a forest near Mathura, birthplace of Lord Krishna
Budhiman	(also Buddhiman) servant of Shakuntala.
Bulbul	a kind of singing bird, daulias luscinea

C

Chadar	(also chadder) a broad sheet of cloth worn over the shoulder
Charkha	spinning wheel; wheel of time
Chatak	sparrow
Champak	a kind of flower
Chakore	a love-bird
Chandan	a sacred tree, or mark made on forehead

D

Devdar	pine tree, cedar
Devee	goddess
Dushyanta	husband of Shakuntala
Dharma	virtue; religion
Draupadi	wife of Pandava princes (vide Mahabharat)
Durbadal	leaves of a kind of grass (agrostic linearis)
Durbasha	name of a sage
Durga	goddess of power and energy

F

Falgoon	eleventh month of the Nepali year (later half of February and earlier part of March); springtime.

G

Gandharva – regarded as heavenly singer
Ganga – sacred river
Garal – poison
Gauri Shankar – Lord Shiva & Parvati
Godavarī – sacred river

H

Howdah – seat placed on elephant-back
Hayagriva – name of a demon
Himalaya – home of snow, Himalaya mountain range.
Hori – festival of colour (spring festival)
Indra – King of gods, god of rain
Jantra – amulet, talisman

K

Kafal – call of a kind of bird, woods' fruit
Kailasa – abode of Lord Shiva, one of the peaks of the Himalaya range in the neighbourhood of lake Mansarowar.
Kalame – a kind of demon
Kalanemi – same as Kalame
Kanak-champa – a kind of flower
Kanva – name of a sage
Karish – elephant
Kashyapa – name of a sage
Kastoori – musk
Kauwa – call of crow, or crow
Kesar – pistil; a kind of plant (messua ferria)
Koel – cukoo bird
Kohinoor – a famous Indian diamond
Kowho – call of a cuckoo (who is there ?)
Krauncha – a kind of big bird
Krishna — Lord Krishna (vide Mahabharat)
Kamandalu — water pot
Keechak — king Birata's army chief

Kshatriya	—	warrior class Hindu
Kunja	—	bower
Kunja-kaumudi	—	a kind of flower
Kusha	—	a kind of grass used by Hindus during religious rites
Kush–asan	—	seat made of kusha

L

Lakshmi	—	goddess of wealth, wife of Vishnu

M

Madan	—	Cupid
Madeira	—	wine
Madhavya	—	court jester of Dushyanta
Mahajwar	—	typhus-like fever
Malaya (or Malya)	—	breeze blowing from the south
Malini	—	name of a river
Matali	—	charioteer of Lord Indra
Maya	—	illusion (therefore woman)
Menaka	—	fairest fairy of Lord Indra's court

N

Nagini	—	female of a holy kind of serpent
Nagmani	—	snake-gem regarded as found in the head of snakes.

O

Om	—	a holy word meaning Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver) and Mahesha, (destroyer).

P

Parbati	—	wife of Lord Shiva
Parijat	—	a kind of flower supposed to have been brought down from Heaven
Pattu	—	a kind of bird, parrot
Prakriti	—	nature, cause of creation (therefore woman).

Priyamvada	playmate of Shakuntala
Pundit	learned man; a Brahmin who acts as preceptor.
Purush	male; creation

R

Radha	mistress of Lord Krishna
Radhika	same as Radha
Ragini	tune, melody
Raja	second of the three qualities
Rama	Lord Rama (vide Ramayana)
Rambha	name of a fairy
Rambhoru	healthy woman
Rehu	a kind of fish
Revati	a constellation of stars
Rishi	sage
Rudraksha	Hindu rosary beads of eciocarpus ganitrus fruits.

S

Shakuntala	wife of Dushyanta
Sal	a kind of tree
Sarangi	a kind of string instrument of music
Saraswati	goddess of learning and fine arts
Shankar	Lord shiva
Saree	dress worn by Indian women
Sashi	moon
Satva	first of the three qualities
Seeta	wife of Lord Rama (vide Ramayana)
Sesha-Shai	Lord Vishnu, his epithet.
Shaligram	black stone supposed to be holy and represent Lord Vishnu.
Shankha	conch-shell
Sherbet	cold–drink of fruit juice
Shikari	hunter
Shiva	Lord Shankar
Shilajit (Seelajit)	bitumen

Shyama	—	a kind of bird
Shukadev	—	son of Vyasa
Sirisha	—	a kind of tree
Surya	—	sun-god

T

Tama	—	third of the three qualities
Tandav	—	dance of Lord Shiva
Teeka	—	mark made on forehead
Toomboor	—	a kind of small drum
Tulsi	—	basil plant

U

Urvasi	—	Name of a fairy
Usha	—	Morning, goddess of morning

V

Vanaspati	—	See Banaspati
Vahan	—	vehicle
Vedas	—	the holy Hindu texts
Vibgyor	—	violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, red
Vicrum	—	(also Bikram) powerful man
Vijuli	—	electricity, goddess of lightning
Viman	—	aerial chariot
Vishnu	—	Lord Vishnu
Vishwakarma	—	creator of the universe
Vishwamitra	—	a sage
Vyasa	—	a sage, author of Mahabharat

Y

Yama	—	god of Hades.

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